

Better Be Slytherin! -- Chapter 1

By jharad17

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House. Snape mentors Harry fic.

Disclaimer: None of this is mine. Honest. She's rich, I'm not.

"Hmm," said a small voice in Harry's ear. "Difficult. Very difficult. Plenty of courage, I see. Not a bad mind either. There's talent -- my goodness, yes -- and a nice thirst to prove yourself, now that's interesting. . . . So where shall I put you?"

Harry gripped the edges of the stool and a horrible thought struck him, as horrible thoughts always do when you're very nervous. What if he wasn't chosen at all? What if he just sat there with the hat over his eyes for ages, until Professor McGonagall jerked it off his head and said there had obviously been a mistake and he'd better get back on the train? Had that ever happened before?

He didn't think he could face going back to the Dursleys having failed at his very first test of wizardry. Dudley would laugh, and Aunt Petunia would sneer, and Uncle Vernon would tell him he'd always known Harry would come to no good at all . . .

Anywhere at all, he thought fiercely. Anywhere I can belong.

"No preferences, eh?" said the small voice. "Are you sure? Well, if you're sure -- better be SLYTHERIN!"

The utter silence in the Great Hall was deafening.

Harry lifted the battered hat off his head and looked around at all the shocked expressions surrounding him, and he bit his lip, hard. He turned to look at Hagrid, at the end of the head table, and the giant man was frowning, which made Harry's heart plummet. Near Hagrid,

though, next to the stuttering Professor Quirrell in his absurd turban, sat a man with dark eyes, a hooked nose and a curtain of greasy dark hair, his face a study in complete surprise before it went carefully blank.

Harry recognized that look, from his own repertoire, when he was upset or really angry about something, but didn't want the Dursleys to come down on him because of it. He was used to hiding, and by the continued silence around him, he knew he would have to hide here, too.

The dark-eyed man captured Harry's gaze and after a long moment, nodded his chin toward the table where Harry had seen other new Slytherins go. So Harry obediently slid off the stool and handed the hat off to Professor McGonagall before making his way over to his new Housemates.

Once there, he stood next to the table, with the newly sorted Slytherins staring up at him like he had three heads, maybe four. He was sure he was about to be told to "bugger off" for the space of one breath, then two, before one of them, a stringy looking boy, sorted into the House just two before Harry, slid over on the bench and gestured to the space now open beside him. His name was Nott, Harry remembered. Theodore Nott. "Sit down, Potter. And quit gawking for pity's sake."

"Thanks," Harry said, and slipped into the seat, ducking his head to avoid the stares.

But the rest of the Hall finally recalled what they were doing before Harry's sorting startled them, and went back to watching the hat as "Thomas, Dean" was sorted into Gryffindor. He got the expected cheers that everyone so far – except Harry – had received, and was followed by "Turpin, Lisa" going into Ravenclaw, and "Weasley, Ronald" into Gryffindor. "Zabini, Blaise," was last, and landed in Slytherin. Harry clapped along with others at his table, and made room as Zabini came to sit down on the other side of Nott.

Professor McGonagall rolled up her scroll and put it away.

TBC . . .

Next chapter: After the first feast!

A/N: This is just an idea, which if no one cares about, I'll probably write anyway. If you do like it, though, be sure and let me know. Or if you hate it, too. I can take it. :-) Gotta have something in between 5th Summer Harry and 7-year-old Harry, right?

Short chapter to begin with, my apologies, but I wanted to get the set up out of the way, and I need more time to think about where it'll go from here. Hopefully, I can keep up with this story as well as my other two, but it may be a bit more sporadic -- like once a week instead of every other day.

Better Be Slytherin! -- Chapter 2

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine

Severus Snape had dreaded this day for eleven years. He had always known that Harry Potter would one day come to Hogwarts -- the boy's name had been down since the day he was born, after all -- and he had always known he would have to deal with the daily reminder of James, in his classes, in the Great Hall at meals, and even in the hallways. He had nursed the dread, worked it in his mind like clay, molded it into the perfect shape of his hate and desire for vengeance. He had expected the child to be a copy of his father. Even after James and Lily died, he knew that blood would out. The boy wouldn't be able to help it, he was sure. He would be arrogant and vain, attention seeking and nasty as you please, with a particular fondness for rules breaking.

But even so, he had not expected the son of James and Lily to be a Slytherin.

When silence descended on the Great Hall after the announcement, Severus had, for a moment, been sure he'd heard wrong. It must be a mistake. There was no way the precious Boy Who Lived would be anything but a Gryffindor like his widely adored and completely obnoxious father. But the boy stood there, silent as well, looking around him as if all his dreams had been crushed -- as well they might! No applause; the horror! -- before his expression went carefully blank the barest moment later, and his chin went up just a fraction.

Severus could have applauded the little blighter for that -- Never let them beat you down, boy! -- but instead, when the boy finally caught his eye, he merely indicated the Slytherin table and Harry went to sit with the rest of his House. After all, it was just like Potter's son to think everyone should applaud him simply for putting on a hat.

Severus' lip curled in disgust. Just like the Potter brat to look down on his new House, too.

He watched the boy sit next to Nott, and watched Zabini join them a moment later. Potter kept his head down, though Severus noted the quick glances he darted about, probably trying to figure a way to get more attention for himself. Arrogant brat.

Albus made some nonsensical speech, the same as every year, though Severus could swear he heard a tiny note of melancholy in the Headmaster's voice. Ah, well, of course the Old Coot thought the Potter brat would end up in his own old House. Of course he would be disappointed. Weren't they all?

At last the feast proper began, and as he did every year while he ate, Severus watched the goings on at the students' tables, and Slytherin's in particular. It often gave him insight into what peer groups would be of a given year, and he could always use that information to his advantage. At the Slytherin table, he was interested to see that, although the Bloody Baron was hovering rather close to Malfoy, putting the boy off his feed, the discomfiting ghost had his gaze fixed firmly on the Potter brat. And he looked thoughtful.

Severus sighed. That didn't bode well.

He watched the Brat Who Lived stare at the massive platters of food, and then turn his blank-eyed stare on the other students. He noticed the Brat didn't take any food until he was sure everyone else had piled their plates high. And then, he snatched at a chicken leg and turned his body slightly away as if he were feral, and protecting his food from other predators. Naturally, Slytherin's little snakes were predators, but not so uncouth as to steal food from each other, for Merlin's sake! They had manners, not like the Brat Who Lived to Be Annoying!

Dinner proceeded apace, and Severus soon turned out the mumblings of the turban-headed DADA teacher beside him, as well as Minerva's occasional huffs of annoyance as she discussed the Sorting – clearly she'd thought the Brat would be in her House, as Albus had. For a brief moment, he considered telling her she was

welcome to him! But he had never removed a student from his House before, and would not set such a standard now. Not with Potter, of all people.

When dinner was through, he watched the Slytherin prefects march his House out of the Great Hall. They strode before their peers, from First Years to Seventh, silently and in perfect formation. He nodded politely as he always did when the other Heads of House acknowledged, as their students tore from the Hall with the scraping of benches and a stampede of feet and shouting, that their Houses would never look so organized or precise, never mind on the first night. It was one of many things he enjoyed lording over them.

After waiting another ten minutes, long enough for the prefects to have brought the newest Snakes to order in the common room, Severus rose from the head table and made his way to the Dungeons. The first night was always the longest for new Slytherins, as Severus preferred to lay down the rules immediately, unlike some Houses – Gryffindor, anyone? – who rarely had any rules given to them at all, or others who had them portioned in dribs and drabs over the course of seven years. Disgraceful. If a child did not know the rules, he could not be expected to realize when he was stepping out of line, and could not be brought back into accordance with these rules through the judicious use of punishment.

Severus stood in front of the Common Room entrance and took a deep breath, set his most ferocious scowl upon his face, and shoved the portrait open. Angling his arms, just so, he achieved his famed bat-like movement, robes billowing gracefully behind him. It had taken more time than he cared to admit to perfect that move.

In the common room, again arrayed by year, his little Snakes waited silently. He nodded once to the prefects, Flint and Torrence, to let them know they'd done well, and swept to the front of the group. His twelve First Years – as well as many of the Seconds – who were on the floor at the feet of their betters, all stared at him with awe . . . except for two of them. Malfoy the Younger had a smug little smirk that Severus would enjoy removing by bits, and the Potter Brat was staring at the floor.

Cheeky thing.

Severus cleared his throat, and was pleased to see the Brat twitch as if he'd been hit by a stinging hex and look up at him. But he was thoroughly annoyed that the Brat had missed his entrance. Well. He would have to do something about that.

"You are all Slytherins," he said with no preamble and raked them all with his gaze. "Your House is a place of pride and power. Of cunning and survival. Of unity and strength. As members of this House, I expect each of you will come under suspicion and fear, from other students, your professors, and even the Headmaster himself. Oh, yes, they will fear you, and what you might become. For Salazar Slytherin was known for his power, and he was known, too, for his exacting standards in those who came to his House. You all have the potential for great power, and the rest of the world will envy you that.

"So let me tell you this now: while you may hone certain of your talents in my demesne, outside these walls, you will act as one body, with only one purpose. House unity. You must be united. Those who fear you will think nothing of setting you one against the other, and in this way, pick you off at their leisure. Outside the confines of the Hogwarts dungeons, no one will take mercy on you."

Severus paced back and forth as he spoke, for he was never one for standing still. As a student, it had caused him some trouble. As a professor, he was considered to "be everywhere at once." It was gratifying how positions of authority changed one's perspective.

"Thus, rule number one. Mr. Flint, if you would?"

Marcus Flint stood straighter, if possible, from his ramrod posture. "Yes, sir. Rule One: Slytherins are the House."

"Thank you," Severus said. "No matter where you are or what you do at Hogwarts, you will have pride and unity in your House. This means, if a member of your House is in danger or in need of assistance, you will assist them. This is not merely for sport, or duels – which, of course, are prohibited to all students, isn't that correct Mr. Higgs? – but for school work and projects and getting to class on time."

Higgs had the grace to look abashed, since his duel at the end of last year had been an utter disaster, requiring no less than three professors to deal with afterwards. Severus turned from him and glared at his newest Snakes. "Having pride in Slytherin also means you will maintain proper dress at all times, down to pants," he waited while thin snickers died out and continued, "And every moment you are on the grounds, you will conduct yourselves as a young Wizarding lady or gentleman should. Your prefects will give you lists of the specifics to memorize and follow, and you should understand I will brook no failure to comply with these regulations, at all, effective immediately."

Their wide eyes were upon him, and he allowed a moment for them to take in what he had just said before moving on. Even the Potter Brat seemed attentive, even a little fearful, which was a bit of a shock. "There are strict homework and bedtime schedules which you will follow rigorously, and you will be up, dressed, and at breakfast with your house promptly at oh-seven thirty every morning. Including weekends, Miss Hutchins, am I clear?"

The slothful Second Year girl was a menace, but she nodded quickly.

"The night time schedule is posted on the board here," Severus told them, and pointed to the notice board just inside the portrait. "As is your morning bathroom schedule. Deviation from these assigned times will not be tolerated," he growled, and sent a Look at the four Sixth Year girls, who were notorious, every year since they were Firsties, for taking far too much time with their ablutions, often to the detriment of their Housemates.

Surprisingly, the Brat's head shot up at this, and there was a wild, panicked look in his eyes, quickly hidden. What in the world . . . ?

Severus shrugged off his concerns, and continued with his lecture for the next hour and a half, laying out his other rules and the consequences for trespassing on them, and suggesting his Snakes familiarize themselves with any mandates from other Houses, too, so as to be better prepared in the larger arena of Hogwarts.

At last came the part he dreaded most. "Are there any questions?"

Malfoy's hand went up. No surprise there.

"Yes, Mister Malfoy?"

"When're Quidditch tryouts, sir?"

Severus sneered. "You fancy yourself ready for that, do you?" Without waiting for, or expecting, an answer he continued, "Tryouts for the team will be posted on the board by this year's Captain, Marcus Flint. On the subject of notices, Fifth Years and above may post without permission. All others are required to seek a Prefect's approval first. Anything else?"

He sneered again when Potter's hand went up. "Mister Potter? You have a question?"

"Yes, sir." The boy did not react to his condescending tone at all, almost as if he expected it. "Are we allowed to use owls for parcel post? Um, ordering from Diagon Alley, say?"

Severus lifted a lip in disgust. "Run out of your favorite treats already? Or did the famous Harry Potter forget to pack quills?"

A couple of the older students sniggered, and the boy glanced around and bit his lip. Then he let it go, and that chin came up again, like he was steeling himself for what was to come. Severus was reminded sharply of another time, another boy, and his own experience with that need to be seen as brave. "Yes, sir. Something like that."

Severus shook his head at the sheer enormity of the Brat's idiocy. Surely he had gotten a list. "Yes, you may use school owls or your own for such purchases. Are there any other questions?"

When there were no more hands, Severus turned the remainder of the meeting over to his Prefects, who would hand out the specific rules lists, set up study schedules for the First through Third Years, and would show the youngest Snakes to their dorms.

When the last of his Snakes had gone from the common room, he took his leave. Not bad, he decided as he entered his own quarters and poured himself two fingers of firewhiskey to enjoy along with his latest missive from the Potion Masters Alliance of Europe.

It would have gone perfectly, if only he had not been saddled with the Brat Who Continued to Surprise Him.

TBC . . .

Next time: First day of Class

A/N Wow! So much enthusiasm! Here's another chappie for ya, right quick.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 3

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

When the last of his Snakes had gone from the common room, he took his leave. Not bad, he decided as he entered his own quarters and poured himself two fingers of firewhiskey to enjoy along with his latest missive from the Potion Masters Alliance of Europe.

It would have gone perfectly, if only he had not been saddled with the Brat Who Continued to Surprise Him.

Severus was unsurprised to hear his monitoring alarm sound. He groaned, rolled over, cancelled the spell and launched himself from bed, still only half awake. His mouth was tacky from the firewhiskey, and he squinted into the bright light of his rooms as he pulled on his outer robe. Had he gotten two hours this time? Three? Really, on the first night, he should just eschew sleep, altogether. Every year it was the same; one of his urchins decided they were too good for rules and attempted to try his patience and his “Everywhere at once-ness,” by not adhering to the schedules he had scrupulously devised. Without fail, every year, some Snake or other sneaked out of bed earlier or later than they should have, and he was left needing to set them to rights.

The only question, every year, was who was fool enough to face his wrath.

Harry sneaked into the bathroom with his toiletry bag and took a towel from the cubby just inside the door. He absolutely had to shower before anyone else was up. It was tempting fate to do so, he knew, but he couldn't bear the inevitable laughter and stares if his

dorm mates saw him naked. And almost worse, he couldn't deal with the thought of earning detentions so early in the term for not having proper clothes.

He'd lain awake most of the night thinking about the Sorting, and about the new rules they were to memorize, and trying frantically to come up with a way to avoid getting detention for the rest of his life before he could do something about his tatty, too large clothes. He wished he'd had more time at Madam Malkin's when he was buying the rest of his school clothes -- his robes, trousers, tie and all were new -- but Hagrid had been running late, he said, and they'd arrived at the clothier only moments before closing. Fortunately, the proprietress had only them for a customer, so they were able to get through the fitting quickly. Unfortunately, no one had thought to mention pants. This morning, he had to send Hedwig off before anyone was the wiser, which meant getting up very early and getting to the owlry and back before anyone noticed he was gone.

Professor Snape was not one he ever wanted to cross. He'd caught the looks Snape had sent him during the meeting earlier, and he wondered what he'd done to make the man angry at him already. It was probably just that Harry got sorted into his House; no one had been happy about it at supper. Harry wasn't sure what he could do to be accepted here, but the first thing he needed to do was get presentable. He didn't want to be an embarrassment to his Housemates.

After setting Dudley's hand me downs on a bench beside the showers, Harry turned on the tap and was immediately surprised to find hot water. Not too hot, but pleasant for the purposes of bathing. He was so used to cold water showers only that it seemed awfully extravagant, and he vowed to make quick work of his washing up. He put his glasses within easy reach of the shower stall, and stepped under the flow of water. It was glorious. The heat of the water soothed away the aches of bruises and strained muscles, as well as the almost constant headache from glasses that weren't quite right.

He did a fast scrub with shampoo over the messy hair that he could never tame no matter how hard he tried, then soaped up his scrawny -- according to the Dursleys -- body, rinsed quickly and deftly turned

the water off in under three minutes. He was reaching for his towel when someone grabbed his arm and dragged him, completely starkers, out of his stall. He didn't yet have his glasses on, but he would recognize the billowing robes of the Head of Slytherin through a thick fog.

Oh, gods, no.

"How deficient are you, Potter?" the man snarled. He was rumpled, likely from bed, and his hair stuck up at odd angles, almost like his own. But Harry was too frightened to do more than shake his head. As if he didn't notice, Professor Snape went on, "Could it be that your tiny brain was insufficient to the task of following the simplest of instructions?"

"N-no, sir," Harry said. Then he swallowed his fear and put his chin up just a bit. If he got hit, he got hit. He could deal with that. Didn't Dudley and his gang pummel him practically every day? But he wasn't going to cower for anyone. "No, sir," he said again. "I'm not deficient."

"Really?" the professor drawled, still holding his arm in a pincer like grip. Damn; it was going to leave another bruise. "Then how is it you are in here, when you should still be abed?"

What could he say? Not the truth, certainly. That only led to more questions and angry Dursleys and probably expulsion from school. He knew how this went. There'd been a nurse once, in primary, who'd asked loads of questions, and he'd even answered truthfully, about how much he ate, and when, and how often he'd been to see the doctor, and then someone from Child Welfare visited the Dursley's home and asked -- in front of them -- many of the same questions. Well, what was he going to say? He'd lied, of course, and smiled and said all was grand, and the nurse had treated him like an attention seeking freak after that. He didn't like to recall what Uncle's reaction had been.

Snape shook him by the arm and snarled, "I asked you a question, boy!"

Despite his resolve not to cower, he couldn't help but flinch a little. "I'm sorry, sir."

"You certainly will be! I suppose you feel you don't need to answer a proper question, is that it? And that rules are for everyone else, but not for Potters? Well let me tell you something, you insufferable brat, you will learn very quickly that when I give orders, they are meant to be followed. And when I deem something forbidden, you are meant not to do it!" By the end of his tirade, he had pulled Harry very close and specks of spittle hit Harry's face and bare chest. Even without glasses, Harry could see the disgust and rage clearly in the man's eyes.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir. I'll obey the schedule."

"Indeed you will. And you'll have detention tonight at 7. Do. Not. Be. Late." Giving Harry one last shake by the arm, the professor flung Harry away from him and stalked out of the bathroom in a ripple of black cloth and menace.

Harry grabbed up his towel and scruffed it over himself, then got dressed, lickety split, shrugging the encounter from his mind. The words the professor had shouted were no worse than what he'd heard from the Dursleys, after all, and he certainly deserved them. He was just glad Snape hadn't asked more questions he couldn't answer.

Once he was dressed, he crept out of the Slytherin common room and made a quick -- or as quick as he could make it -- trip to see Hedwig and give her an order to take to Gladrags, down in Hogsmeade. He was glad directions to the owlry had been part of the information handed to him by his Prefect, as well as a list of clothiers who serviced the school.

By the time he returned, the other students were just starting to stir, making their slow way into the showers, or the common room, and Harry busied himself with reading a chapter from his Potions textbook, wanting to be as prepared as he could be when he met Snape in class. He took out some parchment, too, and practiced taking notes with the quill and ink. It was much sloppier than with a ball point, and

after he splotched up on roll so bad he could barely read anything, he would have traded a hundred chocolate frogs for one pencil.

While he was trying to scrape away some excess ink, he saw Malfoy come down into the common room, flanked by the two large boys who seemed to follow him everywhere. Goyle and Crumm . . . no, Crabbe. He wasn't sure he knew which of them was which, though. Malfoy, on the other hand. It wasn't hard to make him out from the crowd, with his white blond hair and permanent half-smile, as if he knew a prank was about to be played on you, and for a price, he'd tell you what it was.

Harry glanced at them as Malfoy sauntered and the other two lumbered over to the couches and slumped into them, but he kept at his work. Malfoy hadn't said anything to him at dinner, but he'd been one of the ones who stared.

"It's ridiculous, isn't it?" the blond said, and covered a small yawn with a hand. "That we have to be up so early every day. I mean, I could understand the first day, with schedules to be handed out and all. But weekends?"

Harry, not sure if Malfoy was speaking to one of his goons, didn't say anything, though he privately agreed.

"Are you deaf, Potter?"

Making sure to put hold his quill away from his parchment, he looked up to see Malfoy smirking at him. "No. I didn't know who you were talking to."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Like I make conversation with these two, honestly."

Harry gave a half smile. Dudley was just about as dismissive of his goons, too. Didn't stop them from having wicked fists on his command, though. And Harry was awfully tired of being beaten up at school. So he shrugged. "I'd rather we were allowed to lie in on weekends. Doesn't make much sense to get us up so early. I though breakfast didn't even start till 8 then."

"Exactly." Malfoy leaned forward a little and held out his hand. "I don't think we've had a proper introduction. I'm Malfoy. Draco Malfoy."

"Harry Potter," Harry said and shook the boy's hand.

"I tried to find you on the train--"

"You did?" Harry asked. He'd thought he'd caught a glimpse of the white blond hair at the end of the car, when he was coming out of the loo one time, but Ron hadn't said anything about it when he got back to their compartment.

Malfoy gave him a long look. "Of course. You're rather famous in some circles." He smiled, with only a trace of haughtiness. "I wanted to see what all the fuss was about."

Harry laughed. "There's no fuss. Really. I didn't even know I was a wizard till a month ago."

Something in Malfoy's face tightened. "But your parents weren't Muggles."

"No . . ." Hagrid had told him about what Muggles were, and that some folks in the wizarding world didn't care for those who weren't wizards, or born of wizards. "But I was raised by Muggles. You know, after my parents died."

Wrinkling his nose as if he smelled something dead a week or more, Malfoy leaned back against the couch. "That's . . . awful."

Well, Malfoy didn't know the half of it, but Harry wasn't going to tell him. "They didn't like magic," he volunteered, however. "But I kept doing it anyway, I guess."

"Obviously." Something in Malfoy's tone suggested that it would be impossible for anything else to have occurred.

Breakfast was a quiet affair for the Slytherin table, as all the students had been up late and then up early, but some of the other tables were

rather rowdy, particularly the Gryffindors, where Ron Weasley had been sorted. Harry was a little sad about that, but he knew that the boy he'd met on the train and who'd told him about collecting chocolate frog cards and such was probably happier with his family than he ever would have been in Slytherin.

Like he was supposed to, Harry waited till everyone had their fill of breakfast before he snagged a slice of toast, though he almost dropped it back on the platter when Draco gave him a hard look. Instead, he nibbled at the edges, just as Professor Snape came around to their table with schedules.

Harry kept his head down, his ears turning red, remembering the morning's scene in the bathroom, but Professor Snape said nothing about it, said nothing at all, in fact, just gave him a nasty look as he shoved the piece of parchment at Harry.

Draco peered over his shoulder. "We've got Transfigurations first." He rolled his eyes and sent a baleful look at the loudest table. "Then Herbology. With the Gryffindors."

"I wonder how they can hear their Head of House, with all their noise," Harry murmured.

Draco snorted a laugh. "Like my father says, they're uncultured ruffians. They can't help it, really."

Harry wrinkled his nose, but finished his toast and waited, according to the new rules, for his year mates to finish, as well as for any announcements, before they left to go to their first class. Though he was feeling rather queasy with the knowledge that he didn't know any magic and was likely going to be terribly behind all his classmates, he was still very careful, while walking next to Draco to their first class, to make sure none of his awful clothes peeked from beneath his robes. It was harder to hide his trainers, but if he took deliberate enough steps, his robe didn't flap around them and kept them from being seen. So far so good, for the day.

Professor McGonagall seemed tough but fair, and she told them first thing that her class would be amongst the hardest they would have at

Hogwarts, and she wouldn't tolerate any messing around. Later, in Herbology, Harry had a chance to say "Hi," to Ron for the first time since the boats across the lake, but to his disappointment, Ron gave him a disgusted look and turned away.

Seeing that, Draco swore under his breath something about "blood traitors," which Harry didn't understand. The rest of the day went fairly well, and Harry was almost used to the odd way the staircases had of moving when you least expected it, and to the various ghosts who flitted by them in the corridors. Peeves was another matter, but since everyone seemed equally annoyed by the poltergeist, that was okay, too.

He ate lunch with "Teddy" Nott, as he preferred to be called, while Draco sat with a couple of girls from their year, who he said he'd known for years and wanted to catch up with. Teddy kept giving Harry odd looks during the meal, and finally Harry said, "What? Have I got something on my face?"

Teddy's lips quirked into a semblance of a smile. "Except for your scar, no."

Harry frowned. It was a remnant of the night his parents died, and he preferred not to think about it, but Hagrid had said they hadn't died in a car crash at all, but were killed by a wizard named Voldemort. And it was the scar that made him famous. "It's just a scar," he said, and pushed his hair down to cover it the best he could. "I wish people wouldn't stare at it."

Eyes widening just a bit, Teddy nodded sharply and applied himself to his meal. Harry thought he seemed almost . . . wary, which was kind of disconcerting.

After lunch, they had more classes, and then dinner, and then Harry had to go to Professor Snape's office for detention. He knocked softly on the door, heart in his throat, but determined not to cry, even if he was to get caned, like Dudley said they did to freaks at schools like his.

"Enter."

Harry pushed open the door and gaped around the room at the bottles and vials and jars of weird, squiggly plants and severed animal parts floating in variously colored liquids. The smell of disinfectant and something . . . earthy hung in the air.

"Close you mouth, Potter, before a doleshinkle weed makes a home of it." The professor was hunched over his desk, writing quickly in bright red ink all over some parchments, which must have been student work. He hadn't even looked up! While still not looking at Harry, he pointed a slim finger toward the door that led to his classroom. "You will find cauldrons in there. Clean them. Without a wand. Go now."

Harry jumped to obey, and after rolling up the sleeves of his robe, spent the next few hours scrubbing cauldrons. He was pretty good at cleaning, but there were a couple stains he just could not get out. He scrubbed at those for a long time, until his arms ached, and his fingers were sore and blistered from gripping the cloths. He had only two left, from the dozen he'd been assigned, and each of them with one last unassailable stain that he was still working on, when a voice behind him made him jump.

"That's enough. Dismissed."

He spun around to find Snape only a foot or two away, and looked up into the sneering face. "But, sir, I wasn't able--"

"Are you still having trouble with simple instructions?" the professor snapped. "I can give you another detention, if that's the case."

"No, sir. Sorry, sir." He quickly put away his cleaning supplies and hurried to the door, not catching the pensive look Snape sent after him.

He didn't have time to do very much homework before he was scheduled for bed, but he got a start on reading for Transfiguration, in preparation for an essay they had due in two days. At bed time, once again, Harry didn't want to undress in front of his Housemates, and so crawled onto his bed, and shut the drapes before changing into his

nightclothes -- an enormous shirt of Dudley's that was worn enough to be softer than most of his other clothes.

"Awww, is the little half-blood shy?" came a voice from the room. Harry recognized it, though the boy had never spoken to him. "Hiding away behind his curtains so no one can see his nasty little half-blood body?"

"Shut it, Zabini," said another, cooler voice.

"He your boyfriend, Teddy?" Zabini teased.

"I said shut it. And I mean it," Teddy growled. "You don't know what you're messing with."

With that, Zabini left him alone, but Harry's whole face was burning, as he crept out from his drapes and made his way to the bathroom to brush his teeth and use the loo.

He would have to face them sooner or later . . . sooner, he realized, as he had to shower with them in the morning. He couldn't cross Snape again, that was for certain. That night, for the first time in a long time, he dreamed of the snake-like man who laughed in the midst of a flash of green light, and his scar hurt something fierce when he woke in the morning.

TBC . . .

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 4

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

A/N: I'm going to try and alternate chapters between Harry's p.o.v. and Snape's, showing how each of them treats the same series of events. But am not sure if I'll be able to keep that up, with longer chapters, especially. Thus, sometimes, I might do a quick one-two post of a couple shorter chapters, so the same smaller period of time is covered. This one will be Snape, though, and covers the first day of classes, again. I imagine it'll be a few days before I can get the next chapter out.

Previously:

The only question, every year, was who was fool enough to face his wrath.

As Severus collapsed back in bed, he decided that the least surprising thing about the encounter in the bathroom was that the Potter Brat was the one who'd decided to break the rules. Before he could consider any more of it, he had passed out again. He was getting to old for this.

In the true morning -- the Brat had forced him up at 4am. Four! He'd never had such an idiot in his House before -- he spent an inordinate amount of time under hot water in his shower, wondering, not for the first time, how he had ever got along without such things. As a child in Spinner's End, there had been few luxuries, and hot water that lasted for an entire shower was not one of them.

He scrubbed at his hair, despairing of it ever being free of the residue of potion fumes. For a brief month at summer, when he was not

hunched over a steaming cauldron for fifteen hours a day, it hung far less limply. He wondered which student this year would be the first to work up the gall to call him "Greasy Git." Some years, he looked forward to the subsequent detentions he was able to give out as a result. Some years, like this one, since he was assuming it would be the Brat Who Lived who was arrogant to hold that dubious honor, he was positively aquiver with anticipation.

With a last rinse, he savored the memory of the few minutes when he had James' son quivering in fear in front of him. His own eyes had been gummy, and he was only half awake, but he was sure the boy was afraid; why else could he not answer a simple question? He was already planning his detention for the Brat Whose Arrogance Knew No Bounds. It would be sure to take him down a peg or three.

After another ten minutes of water hitting his face, he was awake enough to face his peers . . . Oh, god . . . and the students.

He detested the first day of class.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, at least for Severus. The Gryffindor table was, of course, loud and obnoxious, but his Slytherins behaved as well as could be expected on their first full day, especially considering how likely it was that they'd become used to slothful lazing around on their holidays and were, for the first time in months, up at a reasonable hour. He watched as Flint and Torrence kept an eye peeled for any transgressions, and the little rapturous upturned faces of the Firsties as they took in every word from their betters was beautiful to see. Although . . . Severus scowled to see Potter hunched over a piece of toast and nibbling on it.

Fortunately, Malfoy noted it, too, and gave Potter such a look of disgust it was all Severus could do not to award points then and there. Instead, he finished off the last of his coffee, gathered up the children's schedules, and left the high table. His robes flapped dangerously as he approached his Snakes, and he was the recipient of more than one appreciative look, especially from some of the tender-hearted Hufflepuffs nearby.

Along the way, he picked out various conversations from the rest of the students -- who had little to say of import at the best of times! -- and heard their exclamations over Potter, of all people. "Do you see that by, the one with the messy hair?" and "Have you seen it? The scar?" and "Do you really think he, you know, did that to You Know Who?" and "I can't believe he's a Slytherin."

Yes, well, neither could Severus.

By the time he reached his seventh years, he was furious, though carefully hiding his emotions behind a well-constructed mask. The Brat had been here no more than twelve hours, had broken rules already and still, he was a hero. It was obscene. Severus passed out schedules left and right, starting with the NEWT students, to give them more time to gather the appropriate books and equipment, and went on down to the first years. He saved Potter for last. Thrusting a schedule at the Brat Who Had To Be A Bloody Hero, he said nothing, not trusting himself to speak.

And Potter didn't even deign to look at him. The cheek!

He would have deducted points right there, if not for the fact it would have come from his own House, thus violating his long-standing policy. Other professors could take points from themselves if they wished, but Severus would not assist their road to the House Cup in such a fashion. His Snakes served more detentions for him than anyone else in the school . . . except for the Weasley twins, perhaps.

At last, he could leave the Great Hall and prepare for his first class -- third year Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs, oh joy. And since he rarely ate lunch in the Hall, he didn't need to even see the Brat again until supper.

If it weren't for the prospect of melted cauldrons and the anguish of beginning to correct summer assignments, it might be a good day after all.

"Mr. Flint," Severus said as the bell rang for the end of class. "Stay after."

The Prefect nodded with a "Yes, sir," and gathered his things, rather messily cramming them into his bag.

Severus sighed, but ignored the transgression for now; he had more important things to address. He waited until the rest of the fifth years had gone, and set a silencing ward on the closed door. "Potter is going to be a problem," he said without preamble.

Flint relaxed a fraction from his rigid stance, realizing, correctly, that he was not the one up for castigation. Instead, he nodded, rolling his eyes a little. "Yes, sir. I figured."

"At table . . ." Severus threw out the lead, and Flint took it up.

"His manners are hopeless, sir. I noticed." The boy shook his head ruefully. "He's like a monkey, grabbing at food. I keep expecting him to sniff it before jamming it in his mouth."

"Indeed." The very idea gave him shivers. "I am sorry to have to do this, Mr. Flint, but I am going to rely on you rather heavily to bring him back into line. I wouldn't have thought we needed to make basic table etiquette an item on the rules sheet, but perhaps a special list should be drawn up just for him. It will be difficult to get him to follow it at first, I expect. This morning, for instance, he violated the bathing schedule and was barely repentant when caught. It's obvious he has no regard for rules whatsoever."

"I understand, sir. I'll have Torrence start a new list, she's got better penmanship. And I'll keep a close watch on him. He won't know what hit him."

"Excellent. Bring me the list when you have it finished, and I will . . . explain it to him. That will be all, Mr. Flint."

"Thank you, sir." Flint departed, giving Severus the rest of the lunch hour to prepare for his first NEWT class of the year. He almost looked forward to the sixth and seventh year classes. They were populated by those students who had excelled in their first five years, and who really and truly wanted to be in Potions. He rarely had to intervene to

halt an explosion, and the students were more quiet and focused than the rest of the dunderheads he usually had to put up with. This class was going to have Percy Weasley in it, though, and the boy was a supercilious brown noser. It made him ill, just thinking about it. Still, there were nine others in the class; that should balance him out.

At supper, later, Severus once more kept his eyes on the Slytherin table, making sure they were still as prompt and proper as this morning. The day hadn't been a total waste. He had made a Gryffindor second year cry.

He had also managed to send owls to the families of each of his new Snakes, to start setting appointments for a home visit. He found it was easiest to deal with any problems that arose from the inevitable homesickness and stretching of wings that came with being away from home for the first time, if he had a better idea of the kind of home they were used to enjoying. And it never hurt to have the parents on his side.

He had already heard back from Lucius Malfoy, of course, who had invited cordially him for dinner on Friday. That should be interesting. He hadn't been to Malfoy Manor in almost three years.

Though he was watchful of the Slytherins, he tried not to watch the Brat Who Had No Manners Whatsoever, not watching to spoil his own appetite at another meal if he could help it, at least until Flint brought him the new list. The visit to the Potter household was the one he dreaded most.

After dinner was through, Severus collected potion residue specimens and arranged a number of nastily -- and in some cases, hopelessly -- stained and crusted cauldrons in a heap on the back table of his classroom. One for each year of the Brat's miserable life, and one for sheer pique. Then he retreated to his office and started to correct second year summer essays. Mostly successfully, he tried to keep from weeping over their infantile efforts, as he waited for the Brat Who Would Sure Be Surprised at His Punishment.

A tentative knock came at 6:55. Alas, no chance for a dressing down there. "Enter," he called, and caught the determined expression on

the boy as he came in, chin up again. Did he have a facial tic? Then the Brat's jaw dropped open, as if he had never seen potion ingredients before. Well, he had been raised by Muggles, hadn't he? And, according to Minerva, the worst sort of Muggles, which meant no potions, most likely.

Suppressing a smile, he didn't look at the Brat and said, "Close your mouth, Potter, before a Doleshinkle Weed makes a home of it," and was satisfied to hear the click of jaws slamming shut. Seemed he could obey when properly brought down to size.

Still not lifting his head from the current object of his ire -- Honestly! You'd think after a year of study, one of his students could tell the difference between Murtlap Essence and Bicorn Horn! -- he suppressed a smirk and pointed a slim finger toward the door that led to his classroom. "You will find cauldrons in there. Clean them. Without a wand. Go now."

To his deep surprise, the boy obeyed without a word, practically running into the classroom. Severus scowled; he'd been hoping for an argument where he could assign another detention. Well, he would get it, he was sure, when the Brat started whining about how much there was to clean, or how hard it was to do, or how he never had to lift a finger before in his life, so why should he start now?

But minutes passed, as Severus continued to grade essays, and he heard nothing but the occasional running tap, and the more frequent sound of actual scrubbing. Minutes turned into hours, and when it was nearing ten o'clock, and he had finished with the second year essays and was most of the way through the third years, he rose and stretched out his aching back before going to check on the boy's progress. He would sleep well tonight, that was certain.

From where he stood in the classroom doorway, he could see ten perfectly cleaned cauldrons, some of them gleaming as much now as when he had first purchased them for the school, almost twelve years ago. To say he was surprised was an understatement. Of the last two, he knew that certain of the stains would never come out, not with magic, not with bleach, not with a sledgehammer. But the boy was still scrubbing at one of them, his hands red and blistered from the

friction. He had an array of cleaning supplies lined up along the table and it seemed he was trying each one of them in turn on these last two cauldrons.

Severus watched him for long minutes, taking in the slightly hunched shoulders, the grim determination in the angle of his head, the obvious fatigue in his arms, which he was starting to shake out, frequently, as well as the stiffness on his legs from standing in one place for hours. Despite himself, Severus was impressed with the boy's stamina if nothing else.

He moved up behind the boy and watched him more closely still. The Brat was bony, his wrists small enough Severus could wrap index finger and thumb around one with room to spare. His little neck was scrawnier than a chicken's, and . . . was that a bruise on his inner arm, near the elbow? Likely from where he had grabbed the Brat early this morning. He felt a sharp pang of guilt, quickly suppressed; he did not believe in corporal punishment, having too often felt a heavy hand in his own youth, and he should not have let his emotions take him so completely by control this morning. Alas, there was little he could do for it now. It was probably just a residue of summer Bratly roughhousing, anyway. He sneered.

"That's enough. Dismissed."

The Brat spun around to find him only a foot or two away, and looked up, fear in his expressive green eyes. "But, sir, I wasn't able--"

"Are you still having trouble with simple instructions?" Severus snapped. Ah! The cheek, at last. He schooled his expression to keep his glee from showing. "I can give you another detention, if that's the case."

"No, sir. Sorry, sir." Once more, to Severus' surprise, the Brat quickly put away his cleaning supplies and hurried to the door

Severus watched him go, suddenly feeling his world go a little off kilter.

Instead of considering it further, however, he put the cauldrons away and went to finish the third year essays before returning to his own quarters. There he left the firewhiskey alone and settled down with a book. Still tired, though, he retired soon after. Though leaving the same monitoring charms up as the night before, he tightened the ones around the first year boys' dorm, as he expected to be roused by another Potter excursion, and wanted to know the minute the Brat was awake.

An alarm went off at five in the morning -- at least the Brat had learned some decorum! -- but he realized in moments that it was from the girls' dorm. He swore, got up and dressed, and sought out Miss Torrence to deal with it.

Afterwards, he decided he may have come down on the new Prefect a little hard, but that only meant that she, in turn, would make sure the miscreant in question thought twice before disturbing her Prefect's rest again. Before sending Torrence off to catch the culprit, he told her to assign a detention on his behalf for that evening.

He had just returned to his quarters when another damned alarm went off. First year boys! Potter! Growling not quite inaudibly, he spun on his heel and stalked back to the Snake Den to cut off the newest infraction at the nub. But Potter did not come out into the common room. Five minutes passed, then ten, and Severus was livid. How dare the Brat make him come down here again!

Filled with righteous indignation on behalf of his interrupted sleep, he strode into the boys' dorm and scanned the contents. Six sets of drawn curtains, and five beds where there was little to no movement. The last, however . . . had to be Potter's. He heard a muffled sound from behind that last set. What was the boy doing?

Almost afraid to find out, Severus crossed to that bed and wrenched back the curtains, to find a Brat curled up in a ball, with one hand pressed to his forehead and mumbling incoherencies. He was wearing only an overlarge worn and faded Muggle t-shirt, which covered him almost completely.

"What is the meaning of this?" Severus hissed, keeping his voice low for the benefit of those the Brat had not already woken.

The Brat's eyes flicked open, filled with palpable fear, and he shook his head. "Sorry, sir. I . . . I didn't mean to wake you, I'm sorry." His fingers pressed into the skin around where Severus was sure the famous scar lay, and Severus frowned at the livid piece of flesh, now standing out sharply on the boy's otherwise rather pale skin. Was it . . . bleeding?

"You've injured yourself," he said. "Move your hand."

"Sorry, sir," the Brat whispered as he complied, but he squeezed his eyes shut as if the lack of pressure on the scar increased the pain.

Severus peered at it clinically. It looked almost infected. But the blasted thing was ten years old! "Have you been picking at it, Potter?"

"No, sir. I, er . . ." The boy swallowed audibly. "I had a dream."

"A dream. You've mangled your forehead because of a dream?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, I didn't mangle it," the Brat amended. If anything, he looked even more terrified now. And miserable. But shouldn't he be pleased, that he was getting some attention? Isn't that what he wanted? The Brat continued in a whisper, not meeting his eyes anymore. "But it was a dream. And when I woke up, my scar already hurt."

Severus nodded, though he was certain the boy was lying. Well. There would be time enough to learn why exactly. "Detention tonight at 7, Potter. For lack of regulation pajamas."

The look of consternation upon the Brat's face carried him cheerfully through breakfast.

TBC . . .

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 5

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Severus nodded, though he was certain the boy was lying. Well. There would be time enough to learn why exactly. "Detention tonight at 7, Potter. For lack of regulation pajamas."

The look of consternation upon the Brat's face carried him cheerfully through breakfast.

Harry's career at Hogwarts was off to a really crummy start. Not only did he have this stupid nightmare and the sore scar to deal with, but now he had another detention, on just the second day, too! When was he going to have time for homework? He'd already fallen behind in reading for his History of Magic class. Aside from all that, he'd have to do something about his pajamas before tonight. His owl order would take two to three days, according to the information about the Gladrags shop in Hogsmeade, and then he'd have the right kinds of clothes. But he really hadn't thought anyone would see his tatty old shirt he used for bed. Just his luck. Probably Snape was hovering in the common room all night, just to catch him out.

In the meantime, he needed to shower and dress before any of the other boys caught him out. But if Snape was really keeping such close tabs on him, to make sure he didn't violate the schedule, how was he going to do it? Curling into his usual position, knees drawn to his chest, he forced the pain of his scar into the background. He'd gotten really good at making pain all but vanish; it was the only way he could get up, some mornings.

Once he'd pushed the ache away enough to be able to think, he realized it was still early, and he had time to do his reading for class. Creeping carefully to the end of his bed, he glanced at his dorm mates' curtains, to make sure they were all still sleeping. His book bag was on top of his trunk, and he eased out his History of Magic text, as well as the one for Transfiguration. Might as well start on the essay for that class if he had the chance. After closing his own bed curtains, he settled back on his pillows and started to read.

Not until he heard the other boys moving around in the room did he look up from his books again, or even try and figure out how he was going to shower without them all finding out about him. But now he had no choice. Swallowing hard, he closed his Transfiguration text and eased apart his curtains. Teddy had the bed right next to his, and he was bent over his trunk, gathering supplies for the shower.

Now or never, Harry thought, and almost decided on never. Instead, he slid off his bed and grabbed one of his school robes, hurriedly donning it before Teddy turned around. When he did, Harry was already snatching up his shower bag and clean clothes and heading for the door.

"Potter," Teddy hissed. "Harry."

Dread curled in his stomach like moldy sausage. He considered making a break for it, but turned around instead. Teddy was standing not a pace away, his head cocked to the side slightly.

"Yeah?" Harry said.

"What're you doing?" He kept his voice low, as there were still two beds with drawn curtains. The schedule gave each student a half hour in their respective bathrooms, but some -- like Crabbe and Goyle, according to Draco -- put off their use of it till the very last second, if possible.

"Going to the showers," Harry answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Teddy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but why are you wearing that?"

"Er . . . it'll save me time. If I dress all the way in there. I, er, still have work to finish for McGonagall."

"Because of your detention? He kept you until almost curfew last night."

Harry was surprised that Teddy had noticed. "Yeah. I'm behind already."

Teddy wrinkled his nose a little, then shook his head. "Well, come on, then. I have to finish the reading for Binns, too."

They headed to the showers, and though Harry tried to be discreet, he could feel Teddy's gaze seeking him out as he drew the shower curtain closed before taking off the robe and slinging it over the top of the stall. Once more, he took the minimum amount of time possible to wash, and then dressed so quickly he realized only when dragging on his uniform trousers against the friction of water, that he'd neglected to towel off his legs. No matter, he'd done it, with no one the wiser.

Barely in time, too, as Draco entered the shower room along with Zabini, just as he was lacing up his trainers. Zabini glowered at him, and Harry pretended not to see, but gathered up the rest of his things, including the old t-shirt which he'd rolled up into a tight ball, and ducked past them.

The common room was quiet, still, though a couple tables had small groups of students at them, going over homework. Maybe Harry -- and Teddy -- weren't the only ones already lagging behind. Harry was supposed to be in a study group with Teddy, Zabini, and Millicent Bullstrode but he'd missed the first one, last night, due to detention. And he would miss tonight, too. For now, though, he could work more on his essay until it was time to go to breakfast.

Teddy joined him a quarter hour later, giving him another odd look, but he didn't say anything except to double check what chapters they were to read for Binns' class. They worked together in silence until 7:20, when Marcus Flint -- Firsties were required to call him "Prefect Flint" -- called the room to order and started lining them up to go to

breakfast. Since first years were in front, Harry hurried to put his books away and made his way over toward the door.

Draco was first in line, with Pansy Parkinson just behind him, and then Harry. He hadn't had much chance to speak to any of the first year girls, and wouldn't know what to say to them, even if he had, so he avoided her eyes when she turned to peer at him, and barely managed to not offer to show her his lightning bolt scar. It was why most people looked at him like that, after all. He'd had twelve separate requests yesterday alone, never mind the ones on the Hogwarts Express. He hated it, really. It was far harder to hide when everyone stared.

After a moment, Parkinson sniffed disdainfully and faced front again, and Harry let out a breath he'd been holding.

"All right, you lot. Get a move on," said Prefect Flint and they started for the Great Hall. Just on the other side of the portrait, though, Flint put a hand on Harry's chest, making him flinch back before he could stop himself. Flint gave him a mocking smile and leaned in to whisper, "Mind your manners at breakfast, Potter. Try not to make a spectacle of yourself." He jerked a chin at Draco and continued, "Watch that one, if you don't know how to eat proper." And then his hand was gone, and he gave Harry a bit of a shove to catch up with the others.

Harry's face burned. He stared at his shoes the rest of the walk up to the Great Hall, and tried not to think about the fact that Teddy had been right behind him and had probably heard Flint's orders. But like he'd been told, once seated for breakfast, he kept an eye on Draco and followed his lead when it came to using utensils and taking food from the platters. His stomach, however, kept doing flip flops and he had little appetite.

He managed some pumpkin juice -- some of the best stuff he'd ever tasted, really! -- and a half slice of plain toast, though, and was just deciding whether to pour more juice, or just sit and wait for the other first years to finish, when the sound of flapping wings drew his attention. The "ceiling" of the Great Hall showed a sunny, bright day, but what was really astonishing was the number of owls suddenly swooping in through windows high above. Each of them carried

something attached to their legs, or in their talons -- letters, small packages and the like.

Harry grinned at the sight. Owl post was so cool! He was very surprised, however, when a dark brown owl with a wingspan wider than Harry was tall, dropped a letter on his plate, then swooped up again and out of the Hall. The parchment, which was folded over once, had his name on the outside, so it was certainly for him. But who would send him a letter? Not the Dursleys, certainly, not after Uncle Vernon's reaction to owl post when the school was trying to send him his acceptance letter.

He broke the thin, green seal -- two snakes intertwined -- and opened it. The note was very short, with no proper greeting:

Go to the infirmary when you finish breakfast this morning, and have your forehead inspected. I expect to hear what treatment has been applied during your detention this evening. I will accept no excuses.

Professor Snape

Harry frowned over the letter so hard that Draco asked him what was wrong. "Oh, nothing," he lied easily. "I have to go, though. Snape's orders."

Draco's pale brows rose. "See you in the Charms, then."

"Yeah." Harry got up and strode to the end of the table where the Slytherin Prefects were. "I've been told to go to the infirmary," he told Flint, holding up his letter, and got a curt nod in return.

As he made his way up the wide set of marble stairs in the Entrance Hall, he wondered about Snape's directive. Why should his Head of House care if his forehead hurt? This morning, he'd asked if Harry had picked at it, but he'd been scowling, and Harry was pretty sure Snape thought he was lying about the nightmare.

With a sigh, and no closer to understanding the professor, Harry entered the Infirmary. A long row of beds lined both of the side walls, while the wall straight ahead was almost all windows and looked out

onto the grounds. The room was very bright, with all the white linens and white walls, especially compared to the Slytherin rooms. A middle aged witch stood near a cabinet at the far end of the room, going through bottles one by one and marking a list in front of her.

"Madam Pomfrey?" Harry said as he went a few steps into the room and let the door close behind him.

The woman looked up and smiled. "Yes." She put down the most recent bottle and wiped her hands on a cloth sticking out of her pocket. "Have you had an accident, dear?"

"Um, no. Not really." He moved forward, though he had to admit a bit of anxiety about seeing a nurse of any kind. "My, er . . . my Head of House wanted me to get my forehead looked at."

The woman frowned and closed the distance between them. "Let's have a look then," she said as she drew her wand and motioned him towards one of the beds.

Harry sat on the very edge of the bed, not wanting to mess up the linens, just for his forehead. He lifted his hair away from the scar and Madam Pomfrey gasped. Still holding up his fringe, Harry gazed at his other hand, in his lap. Stupid scar.

The medi-witch stood right in front of him, and her voice was all business as she said, "It's very red, yes. I don't believe it's infected, though. Let's see . . ." A tingle rippled along Harry's head starting from the scar. The sensation didn't hurt, really, but he still pulled back from her rather sharply. "All right, it's all right, Mr. Potter. There's no infection. I'm going to give you a salve for it, though, which has a topical pain reliever in it. I'll apply the first dose, and I want you to use it three times a day for the next week. That should reduce the swelling and give you some relief. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She bustled off to get the salve, and Harry let go of his hair. The jar she returned with was blue glass, the salve itself a light blue cream that smelt of oranges and cloves. "Fringe up again, Mr. Potter, that's

it." Her fingers were gentle on his skin as they smoothed the salve into the skin around the scar. The aching eased almost at once, and the burning pain subsided. Closing his eyes, he swallowed hard, almost undone by this simple kindness.

"There. Not too bad, was it?" Madam Pomfrey said, as she capped the jar and handed it to him.

"No, ma'am," he said and slid off the bed, avoiding her eyes.

"Three times a day, remember. And come and see me again if the pain gets worse, or if the ointment doesn't help." A pause. "Or for any other reason whatsoever," she added. She made it sound like an order, so he nodded his understanding as he made his way to the door.

Classes that day were much the same as the first, except he had a free period right after lunch and Charms instead of Transfiguration. He'd gotten his feather to fly using the Wingardium Leviosa on maybe his sixth try. Not as fast as Teddy or Zabini, but far better than Draco's two goons.

In Herbology, he once again tried to say hello to Ron Weasley, and the boys he was near, but once again, the red head turned his back with an ugly sneer. Harry pushed the hurt back away from him, like he did with most pain, and shrugged as he returned to the table he shared with Draco, Goyle and Crabbe.

"Waste of space, that one," Draco muttered. "I don't see why you bother."

Harry shrugged again, keeping his face as blank as possible. "He was nice to me on the train. But I guess he doesn't like Slytherin."

Draco snorted. "Of course he doesn't. No one does. That's why we have the first rule."

With a nod, but wishing he didn't understand, Harry turned his attention to Professor Sprout, a short woman with dirt crusted under

her nails as if she did nothing besides garden. Recalling a few of his summers at the Dursleys, Harry could relate.

The rest of the day passed easily enough, he even got his Transfiguration essay finished during his free period, and started on the reading for Charms. After supper he went back to Snape's office, dread slowing his steps, but not actually stopping him until he reached the door. Drawing all of his courage, he knocked lightly and waited for the command to "Enter."

Snape was sitting over a pile of parchment, just as he had been last night. And like last night, he did not look up from whatever he was doing. "Cutting it a little close, weren't you?" he asked coldly.

He hadn't been late, he was sure, but almost a minute early. Still, better to agree than disagree; he'd learned that lesson early on. "Yes, sir. Sorry."

Pointing his quill at a chair in front of his desk, he said, "Sit."

Harry obeyed, but wondered what he was going to do for detention tonight, and why Snape hadn't just told him, like he'd done before. Knowing better than to fidget, Harry sat as still as possible, gaze on his hands, clasped together in his lap. Time passed, he couldn't say how much, before his Head of House put down his quill and settled his gaze on Harry. He could feel the dark eyes on him, boring into his head, but he did not dare look the man in the eyes.

"You went to the infirmary." It was not a question.

"Yes, sir."

"And?" A hint -- well, more than a hint -- of impatience.

"Madam Pomfrey said the scar's not infected, sir. She gave me a salve for it."

"Let me see it."

Harry lifted his head at last, and brushed back the hair from his forehead.

Snape sneered at him. "Not the scar, I know what that looks like. The salve."

Flushing, Harry rummaged in his book bag and handed over the blue jar. Snape pulled off the lid and sniffed the contents before nodding and returning it to Harry. "Very well. See that you use it as prescribed."

"Yes, sir."

After another minute of Snape staring at him while he studied the stone floor and tried to keep still, the professor moved some papers around on his desk and said in a perfectly toneless voice, "I have an additional list of rules for you. Your behavior at meal times has not gone unnoticed, even by those of other Houses. I require all Slytherins to maintain proper decorum, especially when in such a milieu."

Harry's stomach tightened with the implications. People talked about him all the time, as if something he'd done as a baby, and which he had no memory of was worthy of discussion, when he knew it wasn't. But if they were discussing his table manners instead . . . he felt sick. With the Dursleys as his only role models, and by proxy at that, as they rarely allowed him to sit with them for meals, how was he supposed to know what to do?

The pause was so long this time, that Harry realized he was supposed to reply, but it hadn't really been a question. He set his jaw and raised his head. "Yes, sir. Prefect Flint mentioned the problem to me earlier."

"Good. See that you incorporate these rules, effective immediately." Snape handed over the parchment, and Harry was annoyed to find his hand shaking.

"Yes, sir."

Snape's lip curled slightly. "You have not read them as yet, Potter. Do so now, that I may answer any questions you have."

Harry had been hoping to tuck the list away and read it somewhere private, later, but it seemed he was doomed to be humiliated again. Fine. He scanned the sheet, noting how many of the items were "don'ts" as opposed to "do's" and the number of times the word "appalling" came into play. Sweat was running down his back, and his hands shook horribly by the time he finished. Dimly, around the rush of blood in his ears, he realized his jaw was clenched, and he tried to loosen it before he cracked any teeth.

"Do I need to explain any of these rules to you, Potter?"

Briefly squeezing his eyes shut, he forced his face in a blank mask. This professor would not win, would not shame him further by seeing him lose control. Once he could speak without his voice cracking, he looked Snape in the eyes. "No, sir. They are quite clear."

The Professor's face was as blank as his own, no hint of a sneer now, no humor at his expense. Nothing. The tableau held for the space of a heartbeat, or an hour, before Snape gave him a tiny nod. "Very well. Dismissed."

Gathering his things quickly, Harry fled to the relative safety of the dorms.

TBC . . .

A/N: Next chapter (some time in the next week) will start out with this detention from Snape's POV and go on from there . . . Thank you, readers and reviewers and those who are both! Your support is my everything: You're my Holiday Weekend, my trip to the beach, and the cool breeze off the water in the heat of the midday sun. Love you all.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 6

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

A/N: This chapter deals with some of the same events of Chapter 5, but from Snape's point of view.

Previously:

Severus nodded, though he was certain the boy was lying. Well. There would be time enough to learn why exactly. "Detention tonight at seven, Potter. For lack of regulation pajamas."

At a minute before seven, a knock sounded on Severus' office door. He called, "Enter," and from the corner of his eye, watched the Potter Brat sidle in with a blank expression, the same one he'd worn at breakfast and dinner, the only times Severus had seen him during the day. The expression had Severus curious, if only because he was sure it was masking other, probably far more annoying, feelings. He used that same expression himself and knew what it was for.

Without looking up from his grading, he put as much coldness as he could into his voice and said, "Cutting it a little close, weren't you?" just to see how the Brat would react.

The boy's expression did not change, though Severus was sure he caught a flicker of something -- resignation? Rebellion? -- in his eyes. It was hard to tell without looking at him full on. Even so, he was surprised by the Brat's next words. "Yes, sir. Sorry."

Pointing his quill at a chair in front of his desk, Severus said, "Sit," and was equally startled when Brat Who Kept Surprising Him obeyed without question, merely clasping his hands together in his lap and

sitting with his head down, shoulders hunched, almost perfectly still. Too still, really, for an eleven year old. Severus was used to fidgeters, and knee bouncers and shoe scrapers of all kinds. He wasn't used to children who sat still, especially without being told to do so.

When he felt he'd given the boy enough time to fret, Severus put down his quill, capped his ink bottle and looked up. He'd known the boy had kept his own gaze on his hands, but it was quite another thing to see the bowed head in front of him. What the hell was going on here?

Where were the arrogance and snide remarks? Where was that Gryffindor bravado? He'd assumed the Brat would still possess it, even if he wasn't sorted into his father's House. Was the boy a coward, then? Was that why he'd been sorted into Slytherin? He shook his head. Such ruminations were getting him nowhere.

A note from Madam Pomfrey sat to one side on his desk, and Severus tapped it lightly with his index finger, considering its ramifications. As she always did when one of his Snakes came to see her, she'd alerted him to the child's ailment and advised him of her subsequent treatment and any necessary aftercare. She also mentioned that she'd observed some odd behavior from the boy, and that he was too skinny by far for his height, which was also under par for his age. In the process of checking his scar for infection, she had slipped in a few other diagnostic spells, and thus determined that Potter was malnourished and dehydrated, and that the prescription for his glasses was not correct. She was almost positive that more comprehensive scans would reveal further abuses of the boy's body, but she was not "allowed" to do any more without permission from either his guardians or his Head of House.

She finished her note with a warning -- either Severus would deal with Potter's condition and give her the permission she wanted, or she would go directly to the Headmaster with her findings and request permission for the full medical work up from him. The warning irritated Severus more than anything else, and if he admitted that he had them, it would probably have hurt his feelings. Slytherin House attracted more than its fair share of students from less than ideal homes, and he had always been first on the spot to make sure each

of them would return to a situation, for winter or summer hols, where at least they were not deliberately injured, and their basic needs were met. Never in the past had he neglected to do what was right by his Snakes, and the implication that he would fail in his duty to Potter was insulting.

And yet, Poppy knew him better than almost anyone else, had known him when he was a student, and she knew his history with the elder Potter and his Marauders, having seen him for treatment often during those years. She was one of only a handful of people -- all right, one of only two people -- whose opinion he trusted. If she saw some reason to question his ability or desire to rectify Potter's situation . . . Well.

Since Severus never appreciated the Headmaster meddling with his Snakes, and since no matter his feelings toward the boy, Potter was a Slytherin and thus he had a duty towards him, it was a foregone conclusion what he would do. The question was . . . how? How was he going to address this situation, when it was all he could do to look at the boy and not want to chuck him out of his office?

Why did the Brat Whose Very Existence Tormented Him have to look so much like James?

"You went to the infirmary," he said at last.

The boy did not look up. "Yes, sir."

"And?" Though his Snakes were usually more reticent than most, thus ensuring he had plenty of experience in the art of dragging answers from the reluctant, he still detested the practice, and annoyance sharpened his voice.

The boy flinched slightly at his tone. Not much, not enough for most to see, but Severus caught it, and filed the reaction away for further reflection. "Madam Pomfrey said the scar's not infected, sir. She gave me a salve for it."

"Let me see it."

Potter's head came up, finally, and he brushed back the hair from his scar with a rather odd expression.

Severus sneered. Really, did Potter think Severus was a member of his fan club? "Not the scar, I know what that looks like. The salve."

Cheeks and ears reddened as the boy rummaged in his book bag and handed over a blue jar. Severus pulled off the lid and sniffed the contents, just to make sure of what it contained, before nodding and returning it. Topical analgesic and anti-inflammatory. He'd made it himself over the summer. "Very well. See that you use it as prescribed."

"Yes, sir."

Suppressing a sigh, Severus watched the boy a few minutes more, after Potter's gaze returned to the floor. What was he going to do? He had to admit, finally, that the boy's behavior troubled him, too. But without details of the life Potter had had before, he couldn't really know anything, and he much preferred to work from a position of strength when questioning his newest Snakes. The owl sent to Potter's aunt and uncle in Surrey, to arrange a home visit, had not yet returned, and was the only one still outstanding. This fact caused him some concern; even if the Dursleys were taking their own sweet time to reply, the owl should have returned by now. He would send a follow up tomorrow, if he still had not received a response.

Moving another sheet of parchment in front of him, Severus now debated giving it to the boy. If Poppy's suspicions were correct, it might do more harm than good. But if not, if the boy had merely neglected his own health by not eating properly, then the list should just serve to remind him that here he was not a pampered prince. And, naturally, Severus doggedly clung to his own rationale over Poppy's. For once thing, it made more sense. Surely Albus would have made sure the Hero of the Wizarding World was well kept.

Once decided, Severus said in an even tone, "I have an additional list of rules for you. Your behavior at meal times has not gone unnoticed, even by those of other Houses. I require all Slytherins to maintain

proper decorum, especially when in such a milieu." And then he waited.

There was quite a long pause before Potter lifted his head. His jaw was set in a determined line that Severus had to admire. "Yes, sir. Prefect Flint mentioned the problem to me earlier."

"Good. See that you incorporate these rules, effective immediately." Severus handed over the parchment, though he nearly took it back when he saw how badly the boy's hand was shaking.

"Yes, sir."

Still trying to provoke a response, Severus curled his lip slightly. "You have not read them as yet, Potter. Do so now, that I may answer any questions you have."

He watched as the boy read over the list. Miss Torrance's script was easy to decipher, but Severus had detected Mr. Flint's more proletarian efforts in there as well. The items included such rules as "Don't grab food off of platters, use the spoons and forks provided," and "Chew with your mouth closed, as watching partly digested food swishing around inside your gob is disgusting," and "Don't wipe your mouth on your sleeve or any other part of your robes." Potter's face paled as he read through the list, then reddened once more, and his hands were shaking even harder when he had finished.

Expecting an explosion of some kind from James' son, Severus maintained his quiet tone and said, "Do I need to explain any of these rules to you, Potter?"

The boy squeezed his eyes shut as his face slowly adopted that blank mask. Severus waited, fascinated, until the boy had gathered his emotions well in hand and viciously suppressed them before he finally caught his eye. The despair and shame in the depths of those green eyes told him more than he wanted to know about how right Poppy's suspicions probably were. But he was amazed, yet again, when the boy spoke distinctly, with no hint of the pain lurking just below the surface. "No, sir. They are quite clear."

Severus held Potter's gaze for a long moment and had to fight to keep from sating his curiosity and Legilimizing the boy on the spot. It would do neither of them any good at this juncture. But he would get the boy's story one way or another. There was more than one way to skin a Kneazle. Finally, he gave Potter a tiny nod. "Very well. Dismissed."

Gathering his things quickly, Potter fled his presence, and Severus could scarcely blame him. It was well past midnight before he returned to his quarters, and he could not remember much from the essays he'd graded . . . which was probably just as well.

No alarms went off that night, thank Merlin -- he would not have been responsible for his temper if they had -- and he woke more refreshed than he'd been since before September 1st. During breakfast, he watched as Potter meticulously and scrupulously followed the new rules, but the boy held himself rather more rigidly than he had at previous meals. Next to him, young Malfoy kept giving him odd looks as he single handedly carried the weight of conversation between them, and Severus did not miss the frankly appraising looks from Nott.

As the owl post arrived, Severus watched the Brat receive his most recent missive. Potter read the order to present himself to Madam Pomfrey for a full work-up and paled, then tucked the parchment into his pocket. Unlike yesterday, he did not immediately leave for the Infirmary, instead pouring himself more juice. Just as well, if he was as dehydrated as Poppy claimed. But when he stayed through the rest of the meal, waiting until his year mates were done so they could go to their first class together, Severus scowled. Why had the Brat chosen now to cease being obedient?

Still aggravated hours later, when he heard from Poppy that Potter had not yet returned to see her, Severus sent another note at lunch time, assigning the boy yet another detention for that night. At this rate, he would have the Brat every night for the whole term! The very idea made him ill.

At the Slytherin table, the Brat clutched the newest note in a white knuckled hand, and turned a scorching glare on the Head Table,

specifically on Severus. Some backbone, at last! But Severus merely lifted his eyebrows in response.

Potter's eyes narrowed, and he flicked a glance down the table, toward the Headmaster, or maybe Hagrid, and suddenly clutched at his scar as the color drained from his face. Frowning deeply, Severus observed the boy as both Malfoy and Nott leaned in solicitously and the Brat waved them off. The pain must have faded quickly, for a moment later, Potter had removed his hand and flushed with embarrassment -- likely for making a spectacle of himself again -- and gone back to his meal, though he merely poked at his food instead of actually eating anything more.

Suppressing a sigh, Severus ignored the stuttering Professor Quirrell beside him and swept from the Great Hall. Before his next class arrived, he sent a second letter to the Dursleys and jotted a few notes in the files he kept on each of his students. The rest of the day passed more quickly than he would have liked, given what he had facing him after dinner, though his first seventh year NEWT class took some of the edge off.

When Potter arrived, promptly as always, he let the boy sit and fret in front of him again, while he finished marking the last of his summer assignments.

When he put his quill down, he observed the boy for another minute, taking in the mulish expression, and the tightness of the narrow shoulders. "Have you been to the Infirmary, Potter?"

"Yes, sir," came the response, a bit sullen in his estimation.

"Today?"

The boy's head came up and there was no doubt of the insubordination flaring in those green eyes. "No, sir."

Right. Severus stood. "Then we shall make the trip now. Let's go."

Eyes widening, Potter made no move to rise, but slid as far away as he could while still remaining on the chair. "No, sir."

"Excuse me?"

"I . . . I said, no, sir. I don't need a, what you call it, a work up? I'm fine. Really."

"Potter." Severus set his expression in stone. "Get up this instant; I will not brook your insolence. As your Head of House, I will decide how you serve your detentions, and this time, it will be in the Infirmary." He paused and then continued in his silkiest tone, the one that sent even some of his colleagues into paroxysms of fear. "Don't make me drag you through the halls."

The boy swallowed, and glanced at the door as if weighing his options. They were, admittedly, few. Under the pretense of moving things along, Severus took a step towards him, lifting a hand as if to grab his collar, and the boy jumped from his seat. Potter's hands went up as if in supplication and he sprinted for the door. "All right, all right. I'm sorry . . ."

Severus followed him out, ready to grab him if the boy made a break for it, and they made their way to Pomfrey's domain.

TBC . . .

More A/N: Next chapter starts where this one leaves off, rather than backing up at all.

Thank you, to my beta for this chapter, Miri, for encouraging me in the idea that it is not either too soon for Snape to figure out what's going on with Harry, and to damn well do something about it whether he likes the kid or not. Thanks also, to each of my readers and reviewers and to all those who are both! Your support is wondrously cool and tasty, like an orange creamsicle on a summer's day. Hugs to all.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 7

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Severus followed him out, ready to grab him if the boy made a break for it, and they made their way to Pomfrey's domain.

Taking the lead, Harry stalked toward the Infirmary, knowing he was in a world of trouble and wishing he had the courage to just make a break for it. In truth, the only thing that kept him from doing so was the knowledge that he'd probably be expelled and then have to go back to the Dursleys.

What the hell was Snape's problem anyway? Harry hadn't done anything to him -- didn't even have him in class for another day or two -- and yet, the professor seemed to really hate him and want to make his life miserable. Harry had hoped that being in the magical world would be better than with the Dursleys, but so far, he'd been very disappointed by Hogwarts. It was too much like Little Whinging, where everyone seemed to dislike him for no reason or, like his relatives, just out and out despised him.

And now he was being shuffled off to see the school nurse, and he'd have to lie to her in order to keep his secrets. The last thing he was ever going to do was spill his guts in front of Snape!

Too soon they were there, and Snape brushed past him to push at the door, which he then held open for Harry to walk through. Not really sure what to expect -- a favorite game of Dudley's had been to do this very thing, and then cuff Harry about the head as he went by -

- Harry ducked a little as he entered the long room. Snape frowned at him, though, and Harry moved a little faster, to get out of his way.

Madam Pomfrey was walking toward them, before they'd gotten a pace or two inside her realm. "Ah, good, Mr. Potter. I'm glad you decided to return so promptly."

Since Harry had decided no such thing, he said nothing, just shrugged a little.

"Well, let's have you behind the curtain, then," she said, and gestured to a movable curtain closing off a bed in the corner near her office. "Strip down to pants if you will."

Harry shook his head. This was going too far. "I'm fine, Madam Pomfrey. I don't need any work ups or whatever."

"I disagree, Mr. Potter, and your Head of House had given permission for the exam. Now, behind the curtain with you."

His Head of House . . . Harry glared at Snape again, angry and embarrassed and not in the mood for more humiliation. "You can't do this, sir. You've no business giving anyone permission about me."

Snape sneered at him and leaned in close, so Harry could feel his breath on his face. Oddly, it smelt of peppermint; he'd been expecting old socks. "I have a duty to all the students in my care, Potter, to make sure they are of sound mind and body. You are malnourished and underweight, and it is my job to make sure there's nothing else amiss with a physical exam."

Shaking his head again, Harry backed away from him. "I'm not stripping down for anyone!"

"I assure you, Mr. Potter, you haven't got anything I haven't seen before," said the medi-witch. She cut him off as he scrambled for safety, and maneuvered him toward the curtained area.

"And I assure you that we will all remain here in this infirmary, until you submit to the exam," Snape put in. "I would like to remind you

that I have far better ways I could spend my time. Do not force me to show you the error of holding us here overlong."

Harry set his jaw. "It won't do any good you know. You'll just get in trouble."

"Whatever are you talking about?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

"If you tell. No one will care, so it's only going to get you in trouble. Just let me go back to my dorm, and we'll forget this ever happened, all right?"

A dark chuckle from Snape made Harry gape at him. "Don't think you can charm your way out of this one, Potter. Get behind the curtain. Now!"

Well, fine. He'd warned them. Now it was their lookout, and no concern of his anymore. At least, not until summer and he had to go back to the Dursleys. Anger tightened his steps as he went behind the curtain, and made it hard for him to undo the buttons on his robes, and his shirt. He was working on removing his trainers when Madam Pomfrey's voice came to him from rather nearby.

"There's a gown on the bed, Mr. Potter. Once you're down to pants, put it on, please."

"Yes, ma'am," he said automatically, and then did as he was told. It was big on him, even though the tag inside said "small," and he wrapped it twice around his torso and draped it over his knees before hiking himself up onto the bed. "Okay," he said finally, and cursed his voice for wavering. "I'm done."

"Excellent." Madam Pomfrey pulled aside the curtain only long enough to come through, and for Harry to catch a glimpse of Snape waiting on the other side, before she closed it up again. Was he really going to stay through the whole thing?

"Now, how's that scar doing today?" she asked and lifted the hair that was always flopping onto his forehead so she could peer at it. "You've been using the salve I gave you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." Her fingers were light as they ran over the skin near his scar, and she nodded. "It looks a sight better. Now, chin up and glasses off, so I can get a look in your eyes. When was the last time you had your eyes examined, Mr. Potter?"

While she spoke, she was waving her wand around in odd circles and twists, and her question threw him off guard. "Erm . . . I don't remember."

"A year ago?" she asked helpfully. "Two?"

Harry shrugged. It had been almost six years, but damned if he was going to say so.

"Come now, Mr. Potter, let's not have any of that, shall we? I know the prescription is out of date, so you can answer these questions now, like this, or you'll answer them later, when we have to bring in specialists."

"Specialists?"

"Indeed. You don't imagine you're the first child reluctant to speak of their health history, do you? We have a connection to Wizarding Child Services, who would only be too happy to come and spend some time with you." Madam Pomfrey smiled at him benignly, but he saw it for what it was. She was a great manipulator.

"I still don't see why--"

"I want you to feel comfortable, Mr. Potter," she said, and he could almost believe her. "But I am concerned about your health and well being. It would go much easier if you were honest with me from the start."

Harry swallowed, recalling how kind she had been with him the day before, with the ointment and everything. He couldn't repay that

kindness with lies, not all the time anyway. He let out a huff of breath. "Fine. It's been six years. I'd just started at primary."

"Thank you," she said, and sounded like she meant it. "Now, I can get your glasses to the correct prescription in a trice, and you tell me how well you can read this chart . . ."

He tried on his improved glasses and gasped; everything was so clear. Excited, he rattled off the letters on the chart, down to the last line. "Thanks," he said sincerely.

She waved it away. "Now that's taken care of, I want you to tell me about how you've managed to break so many of your bones."

There was a rustle of cloth -- like robes -- from the other side of the curtain, but Harry paid it no mind as he yelped, "What?!"

"From my readings, I see that in the last twelve months, you have broken your left wrist once, your nose twice, and your collarbone three times. Please tell me how."

"I'm clumsy," he said immediately. "I'm always falling down."

"Mm-hm." She gave him a piercing look. "Now, how about the truth?"

Could she read minds? he wondered. Or did she use magic to tell her when someone lied? If so, he was in even more trouble than he'd expected. "I get into a lot of fights," he said warily. It was the truth, sort of.

"Oh? With whom?"

"You know," he said, shrugging one shoulder. "Other kids."

"Mm-hm." He was starting to hate that sound. "Who?"

"You want their names?"

"Not just now," she said. "But tell me, were they in your classes at school, or in your neighborhood . . . Please be specific."

Harry squinched his eyes shut. This was going from bad to worse. "Yes, they were in my neighborhood, and in my school." He paused, and peeked at her, and she gave him that look again, and he added quickly, "And one of them is my cousin. Mostly, they're Dudley and his friends."

"I see."

"But it's okay. I mean, it's no big deal."

"Mm-hm." She waved her wand about a bit more. "And you never had them properly set?"

"Sorry?"

"The bones. You were raised by Muggles, correct? And you never went to a Muggle Healer and had the bones set so they would heal properly."

"Ummm." Harry hugged the thin cloth of the gown tighter to himself. What did it matter if he had always had to tend to himself? It wasn't like anybody else was going to.

"That's answer enough, I imagine." For the first time, she picked up a clipboard and jotted something down on it. "I want you to tell me about your eating habits, when you were at home."

Harry frowned. "Like what I like to eat?"

"No. More like, how often you ate, and what kinds of things you had. Nutritionally."

"I don't know. Regular stuff, I guess." This was skating too close to that horrid list of rules Snape had given to him last night. Even thinking about the list made him want to scream.

Madam Pomfrey sighed. "The truth now, Harry, if you please."

He gritted his teeth. "And if I don't please?"

"Manners, Potter," growled a voice from the other side of the curtain, and Harry jumped, having nearly forgotten Snape was there. "Mind your cheek."

Something inside him snapped, and he hopped off the bed and grabbed up his clothes from the floor where he'd dropped them. "I won't, I'm not . . . I'm not doing this anymore. You can't make me."

Snape burst through the curtain like a demon. His scowl could have scared demons. "I can and I will. Get back on that bed."

Harry shook his head, and tried to make a break for it. This was stupid and surreal and he wasn't going to do it anymore!

But Snape snagged his arm as he was dodging past, and whirled him around so they were face to face again. "I am not playing here, Potter. You will remain here until you are given leave to go."

Tugging at his arm -- the same one Snape had grabbed to haul him out of the showers before -- proved fruitless, but damn it hurt! He couldn't suppress a wince as the man's bony fingers pressed into already existing bruises, and when Snape's other hand came up, he ducked reflexively, but the professor only took his other arm in hand, and lifted him to put him back on the hospital bed.

"Professor," Madam Pomfrey said. "I'm sure Mr. Potter will be fine if you let him go now."

"Of course," he said, and released Harry, stepping back just enough to block Harry's only point of exit and folding his arms across his chest. "Pray continue."

Madam Pomfrey took the clothes out of Harry's hands and set them gently on the bed beside him. His trainers were still on the floor; if he'd escaped, he would have had to back to the dungeons barefoot. "I know this must be rather frightening for you," she said, and Harry looked away and shook his head, "But it really is for your own good."

Harry didn't bother to correct her. Why should he care anymore? He was in for it, no matter what he did. In a low voice, he said, "Fine. I ate whatever was left. And only if my chores were done."

"Whatever was left from what?" she asked quietly.

"From when they ate, the Dursleys, I mean. If there was anything leftover, and I'd done my chores right, then I could eat."

"And was that often the case?"

Harry sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound. . . . "I got to eat almost every day. In the summer, when I work outside, it's easy to fill up on water from the hose so I don't get hungry."

"I see." She scribbled something more on her chart. "How did you get along with your friends at school?"

"I didn't have any."

"None?"

Harry snapped, "I couldn't very well, could I? With Dudley threatening anyone who talked to me."

"All right. And have you ever used drugs or alcohol?"

"No!" What kind of stupid questions were these anyway?

"Easy, Harry, I'm almost done."

Well, thank god for that. "And then I can go?"

"Of course. Just a couple more questions. How safe do you feel at home?"

Harry frowned. "Safe? I don't know. Compared to what?" He was almost sure he heard a snort or something from Snape, but when he shot a glance at the man, his face was as scowly as ever.

"Compared to, say, when you were at primary school, or here."

He studied her face for a minute then shrugged. "I'm most safe here," he admitted and smirked. "You know. No Dudley."

"Do you worry about being alone with him?"

"No. I worry about being alone with him and his friends." He shrugged one shoulder again. "They're bigger than me. I'm faster, though."

"All right then. I'll have you lie back on the bed now, let's move the gown down around your hips, that's right dear."

Harry complied, lying back, feeling naked despite the gown, and sick to his stomach. His ribs were dotted with bruises, and his arms looked like someone had made grabbing him a national sport. He also had part of a handprint around his throat, from when his Uncle had choked him a little, last time he'd failed to prune the roses properly.

"You tell me if any of this hurts, all right?" Madam Pomfrey asked, and started pushing on parts of his chest and stomach with her finger tips. He didn't say anything, but couldn't help wincing a few times when she pressed tender areas. "And if you could turn over onto your stomach . . ."

Once again he obeyed, burying his face in the pillow as heat washed over him. He tried to stay as still as possible, hoping this would be over soon. When she pressed one part of his lower back, he yelped and flinched away.

She patted his back gently. "My apologies, Mr. Potter. We're all done for now. You may get dressed while I prepare a few potions for you."

"Thanks," he breathed, not sure he could do much more than that. As he sat upright, he caught Snape's gaze, and was troubled by the look of frank speculation he saw there. Then both of them left the quartered off area, so he could get dressed, which he did in a hurry.

When he came out from behind the curtain, the two of them were huddled close together, near Madam Pomfrey's potion cabinet, obviously talking, but he couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Can I go now?" He looked at Snape. "Sir?"

Snape turned his dark gaze on Harry and waved his wand in a quick arc. "In a moment. Come here, please."

Harry couldn't help but drag his feet, but once he got to his Head of House, the man merely shoved a potion at him. "Drink that."

It was blue and sludgy looking. Harry sniffed it and almost gagged.

"Drink it, Potter," Snape warned. "It's a nutritional supplement. You'll take another dose in the morning, and every day thereafter at breakfast."

Harry scowled then plugged his nose and chugged the foul brew down. It tasted worse than it smelled. He choked a bit on it, but managed to keep it from coming back up.

"And this one," Snape said, handing him a metal cup with a clear liquid half filling it. "For your bones."

With a sigh, Harry drank that one, too, plus two more that Madam Pomfrey handed him -- one for his bruised kidneys and one for his "contusions," whatever the hell those were -- until he was swimming in potions. Finally, he was allowed to go, with strict instructions to return on Friday for another check up.

Even though he was ecstatic to be let free, he had to admit he felt better than he had in a long time, almost free of pain. It was a good feeling, even if he knew he was in for a world of hurt when school ended.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to each of my readers and reviewers and to those who are both! Every day is a good day to review! Hugs to all.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 8

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Severus followed him out, ready to grab him if the boy made a break for it, and they made their way to Pomfrey's domain.

When all was said and done, and the boy was getting dressed again, Severus cast a privacy ward and met with Poppy to go over the results of her scans. They were . . . worrying. Not that Severus was worried; of course not. The Brat had proved more than capable of taking care of himself for the ten years he'd been left in the dubious care of his Muggle relatives, hadn't he? Tended his own wounds, found ways to keep from being hungry, developed an attitude that pitched himself against the rest of the world . . .

It was no good. He couldn't work up a decent gut full of bile against the boy, not after what he'd heard . . . and what he'd seen.

Meeting with Poppy, he had to take a few minutes to compose himself. Always watchful, Poppy put a hand on his arm and looked into his face. "Are you all right, Severus? I know this must be hard."

She was the one who had rescued him all those years ago, who had tended to his hurts each autumn, when he returned from a summer under his father's tender mercies. She knew the memories this evoked, and did not judge him for it. Neither did she judge the Potter boy. And neither should he.

"I'm fine," he snapped, knowing that was the answer she expected. "What are we going to do about Potter?"

She offered him a knowing smile and glanced at the still-drawn curtain. "He'll need fattening up, of course. And he has several broken ribs that are mostly healed, but not fully."

"You didn't mention those before."

"Would it have mattered?"

Severus shook his head. "Go on," he encouraged.

"His kidneys are bruised, obviously, as if someone repeatedly kicked or punched him in the back. No surprise, given the quantity of bruising there. And he has some tenderness near his liver, too, but I believe that will be taken care of with the potion for the kidneys. And you saw the rest."

He had indeed. Never had he seen a body so completely covered in cuts, bumps and bruises. "You didn't ask him about his Aunt and Uncle."

Taking several potions out of her cabinet, Poppy paused and gave him a long look. "You saw how afraid he was. Do you really think he would have told us the truth? Did you, the first time we talked?"

Well, she had him there. "I have not yet heard back from them, about an appointment."

"Ah yes, your first year home visits. Well, from what I heard, Harry had a great deal of difficulty getting his owl informing him about school. Despite hundreds of owls sent, Hagrid finally had to give him his letter on the 31st, searching him out in some cabin on a rock in the middle of the ocean."

Severus stared. He hadn't heard that story. No surprise, as he'd not wanted to hear anything about the Potter Brat if he could help it. "I've sent two owls," he said, feeling almost stupid.

"I wouldn't expect them to return promptly," she said quietly, and he knew what she really meant. He should expect them to return at all.

The curtain was pulled aside, and the boy came out, still a little wild-eyed, but holding himself still and trying for composure. Good.

"Can I go now?" The boy looked at Severus. "Sir?"

Severus looked him up and down, then canceled the privacy spell with a wave of his wand. "In a moment. Come here, please."

The boy dragged his feet, obviously reluctant and expecting the worst, but Severus merely shoved a potion at him. "Drink that." Potter sniffed it and wrinkled his nose at it. "Drink it, Potter," Severus warned him. "It's a nutritional supplement. You'll take another dose in the morning, and every day thereafter at breakfast."

When Potter had choked that one down, Severus handed him a Skele-Gro for his ribs, and Poppy gave him two more potions and set an appointment with him for Friday.

The tightness was gone from around the boy's eyes as he was finally excused; obviously he'd been in pain for some time, and the potions had eased it for him. Watching him race from the room, Severus put a hand up to cover his eyes. He was tired all of a sudden, so tired he could barely think.

"When you do visit them," Poppy said, "make sure not to mention anything Harry's told us today."

"I know," he said, remembering Potter's rant when they'd first arrived. It made much more sense now, why he hadn't wanted to come to the infirmary. Trust was a fragile thing, especially for someone like him, and all it would take is telling his story once and having it be ignored or mocked, to shatter that trust completely.

And yet, the boy had told, despite his protestations. There was still hope for him, hidden under that aggravatingly blustery attitude.

Still, if the boy needed to be returned to his home, for whatever reason -- Severus had heard of the blood wards, of course -- then it would not go well for him if his relatives were under the impression

that he'd spilled their "secrets" at first opportunity. No, Severus would need to be circumspect, at least until he was sure of what kinds of strictures he could enforce for their continued care of the boy.

It would be best, of course, if he could keep the child from being sent back there at all.

"What are you going to tell the Headmaster?" Poppy asked.

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. "The truth, of course." In all its brutal glory. He would let the man writhe, then, when he heard about how his Golden Boy had been treated. Although, how Dumbledore could not have known already was beyond him, and if he had . . . so help him, Severus didn't know what he would do.

"Of course," Poppy murmured.

He gave her a sharp look, which she returned with a bland smile. He shook his head, not willing to play whatever games she wanted today. "Let me know if he doesn't return for his appointment."

"Of course," she said again, and he swept from her presence.

Later that evening, unable to concentrate on his grading, Severus made a surprise visit to the Slytherin common room, ostensibly to make sure no "funny business" was going on, but if he'd been dosed with Veratiserum, he would have admitted it was to check on Potter and see how he was faring after his trip to the infirmary. He recalled his own first visit with Pomfrey, and how he'd hidden out in his dorms for two days afterwards, not wanting anyone to see his shame.

But Potter was bent over his books, at a table with the Malfoy whelp, as well as the blood purist Zabini and one of the more dull witted of the new Firsties, at least according to her other professors, Millicent Bultstrode. Study group then. Good. Potter still looked a bit hot around the collar, but Severus did not watch him too closely, not with all the other eyes warily on him as he toured the room.

Instead, he checked in with his new Prefects, as well as the ones from sixth and seventh years. Slowly, inexorably, he made his way

around to Potter's end of the room, still not looking at the boy, though he could feel Potter's gaze on him from time to time. It was unlikely he would be able to fool the Brat as to why he was there at all, but it was for others he had to do this, for the Malfoys and Notts and Averys.

Zabini was muttering something now, and Severus listened with half an ear to their conversation, and half an ear to Flint's whinging about Slytherin's chances this year for the Quidditch Cup without a decent Seeker.

"It's a swish and a flick, for Merlin's sake, Bullstrode. Everybody else has gotten it."

"Well not everybody's got a Mummy who'll buy them a brand new wand, Zabini," the large girl spat. "This old one's a piece of crap."

"Then it should feel right at home in your hand," Zabini told her with a sneer.

"Hey," Potter interjected. "You don't gotta be rude about it. It's not her fault she's got hand me downs."

"Shut it, you half-blood freak." Zabini pointed his quill at Harry's forehead. "Besides, what the hell do you know about hand me downs? Your parents were loaded when they bit it."

"Yeah, well, you'd be surprised what I know," Potter said, and Severus saw a twitch along the boy's jaw. He'd seen the boy's clothes, what he'd scooped from the floor when he'd tried to escape the infirmary second time. Aside from his new uniform trousers, shirt and tie, the rest of his clothing – socks, vest, underpants, trainers – was in woeful shape, not to mention much too large for him, quite like the Muggle shirt he'd been wearing the night before last when Severus had accosted him in the dorms. He would bet a whole vial of basilisk venom that the boy knew quite a lot about hand me downs.

And now he was also fairly sure he knew why the Brat had wanted to use the owl post, just after learning the rules about clothing. He would

have sworn at his own blind misperceptions if he thought it would do any good.

Instead, he watched as Potter scooted his chair closer to the girl and said, "Here, try it this way." For the next few minutes, he went through the motion several times for the Wingardium Leviosa, but very, very slowly, and encouraged Bullstrode to mirror his movement. Once she was following him along almost perfectly, he said, "You end the swish here, see, and start the flick when you say the 'v' part of Leviosa. Like this," and demonstrated again, this time with the incantation. He watched her arm carefully, and nodded when she started the incantation on just the right syllable. His face lit up as much as hers when her feather took flight.

"Hey, good one, Milly," Draco said, entering the conversation at last, and then he elbowed Harry in the side. "You, too."

Zabini rolled his eyes but said, "Yeah, okay. Let's try the next one . . ."

Severus, of course, did not smile. Instead, he nodded to Flint and said, "You'll need to be selective at tryouts, then. They'd better be soon, or your practice time will be cut short. And for heaven's sake, see if you can't get Beaters who can actually sit a broom, too. I'm weary of red heads flying circles around our team."

"Yes, sir," Flint said. "I'll put up the notice tomorrow."

"See that you do," Severus told him, and left the common room before witnessing another sickeningly sweet display of the Brat's wonderfulness. He knew he was being unfair, and that he had some more serious readjusting of his thinking to do, but decided he could do it better on a full stomach. He'd missed dinner, what with one thing and another, and so ordered up food from the House-elves before settling back to his grading, this time with a clearer head.

The next day, the answer to the Slytherin Seeker problem fell, almost literally, into his lap. Once again, Potter had broken rules almost as soon as they were handed out, but this time, what with the catch

Severus witnessed and the visions of the Quidditch Cup now dancing madly in his mind, he could hardly make himself care.

He did give the Brat Who Could Apparently Make Bloody Rainbows Bend to His Will detention for a week, though. And a week for the Malfoy boy, too. He wasn't going to allow that much leeway, no matter how impressed he was. It was enough that he would need to secure the Brat a decent broom before the first official team practice. Hm. And some gear that fit . . .

TBC . . .

A/N:

I know it's kind of a short chapter, but the next one will be longer, I swear. Thanks to everyone who's been so encouraging about this story! Thanks, especially, to Angry Girl, who originally requested I give it a try. It's been a joy to write, actually, and I hope to keep the characters IC as much as possible as it goes along. I'm sure you'll let me know if I muck it up.

Remember, every day is a good day to review! Hugs to all.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 9

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

The next day, the answer to the Slytherin Seeker problem fell, almost literally, into his lap.

Harry slept poorly, just like he knew he would. Stupid, interfering professors and their stupid interfering nurses. One good thing had come of the whole ordeal, though. At least he didn't have to hide to take a shower the next morning, as his bruises were mostly gone. Zabini was as snotty as usual, making some remark about how Harry must have finally gotten over being shy, but Harry ignored him. It was easiest to do so. He didn't know what the other boy's problem was, but he'd known bullies aplenty back in Little Whinging, so he wasn't unused to the concept.

At breakfast, surprisingly, Millicent sat on one side of him, while Teddy sat on the other. She gave him a shy smile, which he returned, but didn't say anything, so he returned that, too.

"We've got flying lessons this afternoon," Teddy said after swallowing a mouthful of eggs. "You ever been on a broom before?"

Harry shook his head. "Raised by Muggles, remember?" He was, himself, trying to forget it. But last night had put paid to that possibility. "Have you?"

Teddy gave him one of his half-smiles. "Yeah. But don't worry about it. Half of the Gryffindorks haven't been up yet either."

Harry snickered a little over the nickname; it was fairly lightweight compared to some things he'd heard in the Slytherin common room. "We're to have our lesson with them?"

Teddy nodded, as his mouth was full of bacon. Then he pointed at the bottle of blue sludge still sitting by Harry's plate, untouched, where it had appeared soon after they sat down, and swallowed. "Who's sending you potions?"

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry admitted with a shrug, figuring a lie was pointless, and if he could act casually enough about it, Teddy wouldn't see how upset the whole thing made him. "She thinks I need extra nutrition or something. I had to go see her the other day, remember?"

Teddy nodded. "Looks disgusting."

"It is," Harry agreed fervently. "I'm trying to figure if I can mix it with something to improve the taste."

"Not potions, you don't want to mess about with that. You could ask our Head. He's the Potions Master, after all."

Harry wasn't going to be asking him anything. Ever, if he could help it. "Nah, that's okay. I'll choke it down. It'll just take me a minute."

"Good luck," Teddy said with a smirk.

"Gee, thanks."

Teddy laughed quietly, and Harry plugged his nose again before taking up the bottle. He didn't even want to smell the awful odor of it first this time. The potion was just as bad as the one last night, and again, Harry had to try and keep it down by force of will. He hurriedly drank a whole glass of pumpkin juice right after, to wash away some of the taste. Blech.

Millicent was giving him a concerned look as he put his glass down. "Don't choke or nothin,'" she said. "Who'll help me in study group, else?"

"Aww, you just want me for my Charms, then?" he teased.

She laughed. "Got it in one."

Across the table, Draco snorted through a mouthful of juice, making the rest of them laugh as he mopped his face. "Thanks, I didn't know you cared," he grouched.

From the other end of the table, several Prefects growled at them to mind their manners, making Harry and the others sit straighter and school their laughter and expressions to something less raucous. Harry chanced a look at the Head Table, and was disconcerted to find Snape watching him. Again.

Hadn't he done enough already?

He glared back at Snape, then cocked his head toward the empty bottle, so the interfering git could see he'd already drunk the nasty gunk down, before he turned back to his toast.

The mail arrived soon after, and Harry was glad that no owl swooped down to him, for once, to give him detention or infirmary directives. Draco, though, got a big package of sweets from home. After a minute's cajoling, he handed some of them out to the other first years. Harry got treacle fudge and munched happily on it; it did wonders for driving the taste of Blue Yuck from his mouth. After they finished breakfast, Draco brought the rest of his sweets back to the dorms, with Crabbe and Goyle alongside him as always, and the rest of the first years made their way to Transfigurations.

Draco and his two "body guards," looking flushed, got there just before the door closed.

"Long trip?" Harry asked as Draco slid into the seat beside him.

"Something like that. I'll show you later." He smirked and took out his quill as McGonagall got started with her lecture.

At 3:30 in the afternoon, the Slytherins traipsed out of the castle, down to a broad expanse of flat lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the Forbidden Forest, where they were to have their first flying lesson.

Harry eyed the brooms uneasily. None of the Gryffindors had arrived yet, but Madam Hooch, their instructor, was laying the brooms out in a precise line, with about a meter between each one and the next. Teddy, beside him, was looking them over, too, then jerked his head a little at Harry as he strode over to get a closer look.

"School brooms," Teddy said with a sigh, as he gestured to a couple of brooms nearby. "See how some of them have bent or missing bristles? You want to avoid those. That one there, though, it's had some replaced, but the new bristles are at the wrong angle. Not much, but enough it'll tell in the air, make you drift left."

Harry looked at the brooms again, and saw what Teddy meant. "Okay, so that would be a good one, then?" He pointed at the broom three over from where they stood. The brush portion was all the same color, had few straws missing, and they were all in the same direction, with nothing sticking out oddly.

Teddy nodded, with his little smile. "Good eye, Harry. Why don't you claim that one."

Harry did so, and Teddy took a place two farther down. As the Slytherins finished selecting brooms -- Pansy ending up on Harry's left, and Millicent on his right -- the Gryffindors arrived.

It was the first chance Harry had really had to see them, spread out like this. In Herbology, they were crowded around tables in the damp and hot greenhouse, and no one had a chance for socializing. Not that he really wanted to, but he was still hurt by Ron's rejection and somehow hoped they could be friends regardless of House. His Mum had been nice to him, helping him through the barrier at King's Cross, and he thought the twins might be fun to be around, too.

As he watched them, he realized Ron was one of the only Gryffindors who didn't look terribly anxious about this lesson. With all his talk

about Quidditch on the train, Harry supposed that made sense. Some of the others, though, looked positively nauseated with fear.

Madam Hooch, who had short gray hair and yellow eyes like a hawk, suddenly barked, "Well, what are you waiting for?" at the milling Gryffindors. "Everyone stand by a broom. Come on, hurry up."

They scrambled to obey, and Ron took a broom almost directly across from Harry. He straightened his robes as Madam Hooch started to speak.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," she called, walking past the line, "and say 'Up!'"

"Up!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom shot into his hand at once, and so did Teddy's, but they were about the only ones whom it worked for on the first try. Some of the brooms were just rolling over, all pathetic, and some were shuddering, but not going upwards even a little. After a few more tries, everyone had a broom in hand, and Madam Hooch was telling them how to mount and then kick off, when one of the Gryffindors – Longbottom? Harry couldn't remember – suddenly rose into the air before she blew her whistle. He looked terrified.

"Come back, boy!" Madam Hooch shouted, but he kept going up and up, so fast it was like a rocket, and then he slipped to the side and fell, down, down . . . and hit the ground with a meaty thud, making everyone wince.

"Broken wrist," the instructor muttered as she bent over him where he lay on the grass. "Come on, boy -- it's all right, up you get." She turned to the rest of the class. "None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch.' Come on, dear."

No sooner were they out of earshot than Draco burst into laughter. "Did you see his face, the great lump?"

Some of the other Slytherins snickered right along with him, but Harry scowled at them. "Shut up, Draco, he was hurt. I'd like to see you do better with a broken wrist."

"What do you care about stupid Longbottom?" Draco asked. "Sticking up for crybabies now, too?" He turned his sneer on Millicent, and she glared back at him.

The blood rushed to Harry's face. "Just because I don't pick on people who don't deserve—"

"Maybe you should've been a Gryffindork, Potter," Zabini mocked. "Then you could stick up for all the losers you wanted from the comfort of your own little tower in the sky."

"Shut up, Zabini," Harry growled. "Remember rule one?"

Zabini scowled back, but kept his mouth closed.

"Oh, hey, look," Draco crowed suddenly. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's Gran sent him." He picked something up and held it high. A glass ball about the size of a marble, it looked like it was full of white smoke, and glittered in the sun.

"Hey, that's Neville's Remembrall!" Ron shouted.

Harry stepped up beside Draco. "Give that here."

"Why should I? Maybe I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to find. Like up a tree."

"Give it here!"

Draco leapt onto his broomstick and was up in the air, hovering at the height of the nearby trees in seconds. "Well? Come and get it."

Without even thinking, Harry grabbed his broom. Blood pounded in his ears, and he kicked hard against the ground. He soared up, up high, and the wind whipped through his hair as he climbed higher, like he'd been born to be in the air, born to fly. He could do this; it was

easy. It was wonderful. After pulling on his broom to go a bit higher, he turned sharply to meet Draco, face to face in mid air. He held out his hand. "Give me that," he said clearly, but in a low voice.

Draco shook his head. His voice was low, too; by unspoken agreement, both of them tried to keep their conversation just between them. "No mercy, remember? Let it go, Harry."

"I won't. The kid was scared and hurt, and he didn't do anything to you or any of us. I won't let you break his present from his Gran, too."

"Suit yourself," Draco said. "But you'll have to catch it."

Harry frowned, and then realized what Draco meant when the blond threw the glass ball high into the air and then streaked back to the ground before Harry could stop him.

As though in slow motion, the ball rose up in the air and then started to fall. Harry leaned forward and pointed his broom handle down -- he gathered speed in a steep dive, racing the ball -- wind whistled in his ears, mingled with the screams of people watching -- he stretched out his hand -- a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently onto the grass with the Remembrall clutched safely in his fist.

"MISTER POTTER!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor Snape was hurtling toward him, his great black robes billowing out like bat wings. His black eyes flashed dangerously. Professor McGonagall was hurrying to catch up, her pace no match for Snape's.

Harry got to his feet, trembling.

"Of all the asinine, imbecilic, senseless things to do!" Snape snarled as he came to a halt to loom over Harry. He snatched the Remembrall from Harry's hand, and passed it over to McGonagall without so much as a look in her direction. "You could have broken your fool neck!"

“Professor, it wasn’t his fault—”

“Not now, Miss Granger,” McGonagall said, and Harry turned to see who’d defended him, noting a bushy haired girl for the first time, and then remembered her from the train. Hermione Granger. But before he could even say thanks, a hand grabbed his arm and pushed him toward the school.

He stumbled forward as Snape growled, “Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Potter, follow me,” and then took off so fast that Harry and Draco had to run to keep up with his long strides.

Oh, god. Harry was going to be expelled, he just knew it. And now, right after getting all the bruises and stuff healed, he was going to have to go back to the Dursleys. Draco also looked worried, but he’d only have to go back to people who sent him huge boxes of sweets; how hard would that be?

Still, he felt bad; if he hadn’t challenged Draco over the Remembrall like that, neither of them would have been in the air. Neither of them would now be facing expulsion. As they tailed after Snape, Harry felt sick and couldn’t get enough air. Maybe, if he ran now, he could get far enough away they wouldn’t be able to find him to put him back on the train . . . Maybe he could hide in the Forest.

Snape marched across the lawn, up the wide front stairs, in through the front door, then up the marble staircase to the Defense classroom on the second floor. He slammed the door open, startling the students just inside. “Professor Quirrell,” he called to the turbaned man at the front of the room. “I would like a word with Mr. Flint.”

“O-o-of course, P-p-professor.” Quirrell flicked a hand toward one of the rows, and Prefect Flint got up, scowling, but his expression smoothed as soon as he reached the corridor and glimpsed Draco and Harry.

Snape grabbed Draco’s collar in one hand and Harry’s in the other, spun them both around and gave them a shove. “My office. Now!”

The two of them scrambled to obey. Harry didn't bother looking behind him as they tore down to the dungeon, but he was sure Snape dogged their heels the whole way. When they got there, though, Snape wasn't with them, and they had to wait for him in the hallway, as the door was locked.

Biting his lip, Harry stood stiffly in front of the door, and Draco lounged against the wall.

"Sorry," Harry said after a minute, when he could no longer bear the silence.

"What for?" Draco said. "You caught the bloody thing. Even got a Mudblood to stand up for you."

"But we're going to be expelled," Harry hissed.

"Maybe you will, but a Malfoy? I think not."

Harry knew he was going to be sick now.

It was only another minute or two before Snape appeared, looking for all the world like a vampire from a scary movie, swooping down on his prey. Harry shrank back against the wall, staying out of reach of the professor's grabby hands, but Snape just waved his wand over the door to unlock it, before he curtly motioned them inside.

This was one room Harry was becoming far too familiar with. He didn't even have a chance to look around, though, before the door slammed behind shut them and Snape bellowed, "What in the name of Salazar Slytherin did you think you were doing?"

Draco gave a little shrug, even as Harry said, "Sorry, sir."

Snape seemed to not even hear him as he continued shouting, "You're lucky I was there to catch your little display or McGonagall would have had you both on the next train out of Hogsmeade. Yes, both of you, Mr. Malfoy. Your father carries little influence with the Gryffindor Head of House."

“It was just a little flying, Professor,” Draco started. “No one got—”

Snape interrupted him, “Rules are not made to be broken, despite what you may think, Mr. Malfoy. And tampering with another student's belongings, especially in front of two dozen witnesses, is hardly worthy of any special consideration. What would your father have to say to that, I wonder?”

Draco paled even further than his normal milky-white color, and Harry couldn't help but suck in a quick breath when the Professor's dark eyes turned on him. “And you! Did we not just spend hours in the infirmary, repairing your ungrateful little body? Is this how you repay Madam Pomfrey's hard work? Risking your life for a worthless piece of glass?”

Harry looked down, unable to hold the man's gaze any longer. Shame washed over him, but he didn't bother to deny Snape's words; it was true, all of it. No matter how much he felt flying was second nature to him, he really could have been killed, and still might be expelled, for a Remembrall. “I'm sorry, sir,” he said again.

There was silence for a long moment, then Snape, much more calmly, said, “You will both have detention for the next week. Mr. Malfoy, you will have yours with Filch, and Mr. Potter, you will serve yours with me. Starting tonight sharply at seven. That will be all, gentlemen.”

Harry let go his breath, feeling a dizzy sort of giddiness at the reprieve. He wasn't going to be expelled!

“Mr. Potter, remain another moment, please,” Snape said, and Harry's gut took another wrenching turn.

Draco gave him a commiserating look as he hurried out of Snape's office, but Harry could hardly bear the suspense even so.

“Mr. Potter.”

“Yes, sir?” He met the Professor's gaze again.

"I have arranged for Mr. Flint to meet us here in a few moments. Please have a seat."

Gaping at the change of tone and the offer, Harry stumbled back against the chair he'd taken a couple nights ago before sinking into it. Snape stared at him, his black eyes fathomless, and Harry could not look away. Neither of them spoke.

A heavy knock sounded on the door a few minutes later, and Harry jumped.

"Enter," Snape called, and the door opened to admit Marcus Flint. The large fifth year scowled at Harry before nodding at Snape.

Neither of them expected the half smile that settled on Snape's face, or the next words out of his mouth. "Mr. Flint," Snape said, sounding almost pleased. "I believe I have found you a Seeker."

TBC . . .

A/N: Lookee! Another chapter, after just one day! I must really love you guys or something.

I've mucked around a bit with the order in which classes occur for the first year Slytherins and Gryffindors, as I wanted to get this scene in before I got to their first potions class. I hope you don't mind. Also, a few bits of dialogue in the flying lesson scene are stolen whole cloth from the original novel. You can probably guess which ones.

Remember, every day is a good day to review! Hugs to all.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 10

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Neither of them expected the half smile that settled on Snape's face, or the next words out of his mouth. "Mr. Flint," Snape said, sounding almost pleased. "I believe I have found you a Seeker."

Severus watched as the expression on Potter's face went through various permutations from startled and ashamed all the way through shock and surprise and halting somewhere around disbelief mixed with joy. The boy's mouth hung agape, and Severus wanted little more than to shut it and wipe the idiotic grin from his face.

"A Seeker?" Flint's brow was furrowed. "Who, sir?"

Try as he might, Severus could not hold back his sigh of annoyance. "Why, Mr. Potter, of course." He caught a jerked movement from the Brat from the corner of his eye, as if the boy could not believe it, still. "Take him out before dinner today. Test his reflexes and teach him the rudiments, but if he does anywhere near as well on the pitch as he did on the lawn earlier, I'd say our chances at the Cup have risen exponentially." He paused and glared at Flint's still furrowed brow. "We have a very good chance at it."

"Oh! Good, sir." But now Flint scowled at the boy, very much like Severus himself must have, before he'd taken the Brat to the Infirmary. Before he'd seen him fly.

"Do not think I am condoning your risky behavior, Mr. Potter," Severus cautioned, using a very quiet voice he brought out when

special circumstances warranted, and was gratified to see wariness flare in the boy's eyes again. "You very nearly found yourself in Madam Pomfrey's care again. I suggest you learn a modicum of restraint before you get yourself killed. And I plan to send this message home--"

The jerk was unmistakable this time. "To the Dursleys?" Potter squawked. "Please don't!"

"Do NOT interrupt me, Potter," Severus growled, remembering he still had not heard from either of the blasted owls he'd sent to Surrey. "As I was saying, this lesson will be driven home, one hopes, with the detentions you will serve this next week. You will have a new appreciation by the end of the week of the serious consequences for breaking rules, especially those designed for your protection. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you." The boy's face, which had lost color when he thought Severus was sending a note home, now looked flushed, and he dropped his gaze.

"You are dismissed. I believe you have an hour before dinner . . ."

Potter nodded, and looked at Flint, who glared back.

Severus cleared his throat. "Mr. Flint, if you would be so kind . . . the pitch awaits."

"Oh, yes, sir. Come on, Potter." With that, the large boy led the Brat out of the dungeon, and Severus let his heart finally settle back in his chest, from where it had lodged, at about the time he'd seen the Brat Who Lived to Make Everyone Fear for His Life hurtling through the air like a javelin aimed at the castle.

Then he sent a notice to the caretaker, Filch, to let him know to expect Draco Malfoy for detention. Perhaps a week scrubbing the mud from the Entrance Hall floor and combing the fleas out of Mrs. Norris' coat would teach him some humility. Or at least the value of not getting caught.

At dinner, after getting the report from Flint on the boy's exceptional talent, he had to gloat to Minerva. She was suitably annoyed . . . and jealous.

"Well it makes sense," she snapped. "After all, James was a very talented player."

The words froze the smile on his face, but he made himself respond anyway. "Ah, yes, and I can just imagine his pride, showing up for Quidditch games and cheering for Slytherin, waving a green and silver flag, holding--"

"That's quite enough, Severus," she interrupted. "You've made your point."

He smirked. "And it's worth a hundred and fifty, let's not forget."

She rolled her eyes. "As if you'd let me. Pass the potatoes, if you would."

He did so, and took the opportunity to look over his Snakes, who were behaving themselves, for the most part. When he caught a glimpse of the Potter Brat speaking animatedly with Draco Malfoy, both of them sporting frowns, he wondered if they were discussing the information he'd given each of them to hold over the other. The son of Lucius Malfoy would have little trouble making use of such information, he knew, but he was looking forward to seeing what use the Brat would put it to.

Well, he supposed he'd find out, one way or the other.

That night, he set the Brat the task of chopping half keg of flobberworms. As before, Potter didn't complain or even look put out by the request, just went right to work. Severus watched as the boy's confidence grew at the task after a few mistarts. It was obvious he had never touched a flobberworm before, but just as obviously, he knew his way around a knife. The first was unsurprising, the latter . . .

As Potter cut one flobberworm lengthwise, then turned it to dice smoothly up the length, Severus stepped up behind him. "Were you a chef in another life?"

Potter's shoulders twitched, but his knife did not pause. "Something like that, sir."

"Explain."

Severus did not mistake the tightening of the boy's grip on the knife, and the way his shoulders were now hitched a bit higher. There was a long pause, in which Severus had to keep a firm hold on his temper, but he knew the boy was gathering his courage, and so he waited. He was rewarded with, "I cooked. For them, from when I was little."

"This would be the same them who starved you."

"I wasn't starved." The knife came down hard on a poor, unsuspecting flobberworm and reduced it to mush.

"Ah."

"I wasn't. Sir." The boy took the few moments of Severus' silence to recapture his equilibrium and quiet his breaths. But there were still spots of color on the boy's cheeks, and the knife was held too tightly for fine work. "Why'd you have to go and say that in front of Malfoy anyway?"

Severus smiled to himself. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"You told him I was injured. You told him I needed to be put back together. Now he knows stuff he that, that he has no right to!"

"I did no such thing."

"Well, you yelled it in front of him. Same difference."

"Mr. Potter. I do not appreciate your tone of voice."

Another twitch, and the shoulders hitched higher. Then a soft, "I'm sorry, sir."

Severus stared at the boy's back for several long minutes, letting the boy get his breathing under control again. Then, in an equally quiet voice, he said, "Draco Malfoy will use any weapons at his disposal in his interactions with others. You would do well to remember that, and that I did not play favorites."

The silence went on far longer this time, and the boy's shoulders relaxed, only to twitch again as Severus moved back a few paces. His startle reflex was rather well honed, for someone who was only terrorized at school as he claimed. There was quite a lot more to this situation, and Severus planned to get to the bottom of it.

Despite his careful scrutiny, and what he thought the silence meant, he was very surprised when the Brat said, almost too quietly to hear, "But I wouldn't use a weapon like that against him."

Severus took a moment to recover from this admission, then sneered at the Brat Who Lived to Confound Expectations. "Then he will always have you at a disadvantage, Potter."

When the boy sighed and made as if to turn around at last, Severus growled, "Get to work! Those flobberworms won't cut themselves."

Later, he had to admit – though he was sorely tempted not to – that he hadn't seen worms diced so well by a student in years.

The next day was the first Potions class with the Brat and the rest of the first year Slytherins. Severus was prepared for anything. Every year, against Severus' explicit requests, Albus grouped the Gryffindors and Slytherins together. It was all he could do not to howl in frustration. The combined Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff class was, frankly, dull by comparison.

But this group . . . he had to watch them more closely than any other class. Untrained and prone to taunts and tricks, they were forty times more likely to blow up his classroom. He swept in, scowling, and set the tone immediately, his voice pitched so they could only hear him if

they were perfectly still, with a hint of wonder, and a hint of madness, in it.

They all watched him, enraptured, as he went through his introduction, promised them glory, beauty, a stopper for death, if only they would apply themselves . . . all of them watching and waiting, eager young dunderheads that they were.

Abruptly, he began taking roll. He paused only once, at, "Harry Potter," letting the syllables linger in the air. "Our new . . . celebrity," he intoned, watching the Brat's expression carefully. Potter's head came up, eyes narrowed. Beside him, to Severus' surprise, Theodore Nott stiffened, his own gaze piercing. Severus suppressed a smile. Seemed Potter had a fan club already. Time to find out for certain, who he could count on.

When he was done with calling names, he snapped, "Potter! What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Potter glanced at Nott looked as stumped as he was. The bushy-haired girl, Miss Granger, was it? – who'd stepped forward on Potter's behalf yesterday, shot her hand in the air.

"I don't know, sir," said Potter, as Severus knew he would.

His lips curled into a sneer. "Tut, tut -- fame clearly isn't everything." He ignored Granger's hand. She wasn't going to aid his fact finding mission.

"Let's try again. Potter, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

The Granger crane stretched as high into the air as she could go without leaving her seat, but Potter was obviously stumped. Behind him, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, were shaking with laughter. Interesting. He shot them a glare, and they subsided, but only barely.

"I don't know, sir."

"Thought you wouldn't open a book before coming, eh, Potter?"

Potter flushed, and Severus knew immediately that the boy had not had access to his books before the term started in that house full of Muggles who disdained him. Still, the Brat held his gaze, not an easy feat for grown men, and even a couple of the Gryffindors looked put out on his behalf.

"What is the difference, Potter, between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

At this, the Granger chit stood up, her hand stretching toward the dungeon ceiling.

"I don't know," said Potter quietly. "I think she does, though, why don't you try her?"

Nott shot him a look with wide eyes as a few people laughed, though none of them Slytherins. Malfoy's smirk was rather large, however. Potter's hands were shaking, and he folded them sharply together on his desk.

Severus snapped, "Sit down," at Granger. "For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping potion so powerful it is known as the Draught of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. As for monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, which also goes by the name of aconite.

"Well? Why aren't you all copying that down?"

There was a sudden rummaging for quills and parchment. Over the noise, Severus said, "And another detention for your cheek, Potter."

Potter nodded and continued to get his parchment readied.

As he ordered the students to follow the directions on the board to make a simple cure for boils, Severus hoped the special lesson had not been lost on the boy.

When class was over, he prepared a bin of black beetles for Potter to crush into powder during his detention tonight, with explicit written instructions, as he would not be there to supervise. Amazingly, he knew he could trust the boy to do his detention as assigned.

Dinner at the Malfoys was always an interesting affair. The food was as sumptuous as ever, served on the very best china by well trained House-elves. Severus knew not to bring up anything business related until after they moved to the sitting room for brandy and conversation, and he was not surprised to have the topic swing immediately to Draco's performance in school.

"I have had him in but one class," Severus admitted, and took a sip of the brandy, savoring the burn in his throat, "but his potion making is obviously of a superior quality," to that of trained dogs.

"Of course," Narcissa replied, her mouth in a pretty bow. "Lucius has always arranged for the best tutors."

"Of course," Severus murmured.

"What do you think are his chances of making the Quidditch team?" Lucius asked. "He'll make a good Seeker."

Turning the possible answers over in his mind, Severus decided on, "Tryouts will be next week, and final decisions will be up to the Captain, of course. I can put a good word in for someone of talent, however."

"Excellent." Lucius took a hefty belt of his drink. "I happen to be going abroad next week, and will stop over in Budapest. There is an apothecary just south of there you have frequented, haven't you? I wonder if I might pick something special up for your private stores."

Once more, Severus chose his words carefully, a little disconcerted that Malfoy was monitoring his activities. And he did not want to be beholden to this man for any reason whatsoever. Even so . . . "I am in need of a quantity of Boomslang skin," he admitted. "And it is rather less scarce on the continent."

Malfoy smiled and lifted his glass slightly. “Boomslang skin, then.”

Talk turned to more inconsequential matters, and the evening passed more pleasantly than Severus might have hoped, until it was near time to leave, and Lucius, with his too-innocent smile, said, “I heard that Slytherin House is now home to the Boy Who Lived.” There was a special emphasis on the epithet that Severus knew he would be wise to remember.

“It was a surprise to many people, yes,” he murmured.

“From what I have heard,” – no doubt from his son, the little brat – “he is getting along rather well with Hiram Nott’s boy. And has even been seen standing up for Gryffindors.”

“True,” Severus said. “Nott has certainly been keeping the boy under observation, as it would behoove many of us to do.”

“Mm.” Lucius poured himself another drink, ignoring the small sigh from Narcissa. “I should hope Draco sees the merit in that, as well.”

“As to that,” Severus said, “there seems to be some rivalry between Mr. Potter and Draco. While I heartily approve of activities that will make both boys strive to be and do their best, I have noticed a tendency for their interactions of this nature to spill over past the House boundaries.”

“Thus breaking rule one, eh Severus?”

“Exactly.” Severus smiled a little. “I’m sure you can see how I would be concerned.”

“I do. I will speak to Draco.”

As if he didn’t already do so every day, Severus thought. Soon he was able to take his leave.

Immediately upon returning, he sought out Dumbledore, to let the Old Codger know that his precious Golden Boy (albeit with green and silver trim) was under scrutiny from Malfoy at least, and that this

same personage was going to Hungary next week. There had been odd rumblings from that area, specifically Romania, Hungary and Albania, over the last few years, and with the Brat Who Garnered Too Much Attention now at Hogwarts, there were many more precautions they would need to take, against former Death Eaters, and even against a return of Voldemort. Severus wasn't fool enough to think he was gone for good, and Dumbledore shared his feelings.

He knew this was unlikely to be the kind of quiet, uncomplicated year he always appreciated, and at the center of the hurricane was one green-eyed boy.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you everyone, for your support on this story! It's great fun to write, and it's interesting developing the ways in which this one change can wreak havoc on the rest of Harry's Hogwarts career. Eclairs and cocoa for everyone who reviews!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 11

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

When class was over, he prepared a bin of black beetles for Potter to crush into powder during his detention tonight, with explicit written instructions, as he would not be there to supervise. Amazingly, he knew he could trust the boy to do his detention as assigned.

When Harry arrived at Snape's office for his detention at 7 o'clock on Friday evening, there was no answer when he knocked and a quick test of the knob found the door locked. Then he noticed the folded piece of parchment stuck to the door, next to the list of Snape's office hours and the "Do Not Disturb Upon Pain of Flagellation" sign. Harry's initials were on the front of the parchment, so he yanked the note off the door. The script inside was tiny, crabbed and slanting, and Harry had to squint to make it out.

Mr Potter,

Your detention assignment is readied in my classroom. I have temporarily changed the password to permit you entrance, namely an infusion you seemed to have no knowledge of in class today. I trust that is no longer the case. When I return, I expect to find you have completed the work and cleaned up after yourself.

Do not disappoint me.

S. Snape

Odd, Harry thought. But he didn't dwell too much upon it and simply continued down the corridor to the Potions classroom, where the door opened to the word "Wormwood," letting Harry inside. On a table near the front of the room sat a bin of black beetles, a number of small glass jars, and a mortar and pestle. A set of instructions on the proper method for grinding the beetles and how much went into each jar was on another piece of parchment leaning up against the bin, in that tight scrawl of the Professor's.

With a sigh, Harry got started. Using a small scoop, he moved beetles from bin to mortar then took up the club-shaped stone pestle and ground them to a fine powder before scraping them into one of the jars. It took three full scoops of beetles to fill each glass jar half-way as instructed, and Harry soon lost himself in the mindless, repetitive work.

His thoughts drifted to the last couple of days, and the highs and lows of his first full week at school. From almost being expelled to that session with Flint on the Quidditch pitch, where the large Prefect had first explained about the different roles on the team, then watched, with his mouth hanging open, as Harry caught the little golden snitch over and over. At dinner time, Flint actually clapped Harry on the back when he touched ground after his last catch, and smiled at him for the first time ever.

"Good one, Potter. That Cup will be ours for sure this year."

Still riding that high at dinner, he'd almost forgotten to go to detention afterwards, and had to scramble to get there on time. Then the Professor had been so weird, watching him dice those disgusting worms . . . flobber worms, were they? What kind of name was that? Their insides were chock full of the most sticky and viscous slime he'd ever had the misfortune to touch, although his textbook said they were good for thickening potions, so he supposed he'd need to get used to them. If possible.

Snape had studied him as he worked; he'd felt the man's dark eyes on him the whole time. And then, asking him about being a chef, of all things, and saying Harry'd been starved at the Dursleys.

As if he cared.

Then all that rot about Draco, and how to use information against him. Like it made a difference to Harry if Draco was afraid of his father. It wasn't like Harry didn't understand being wary of adults, even afraid of them. Adults couldn't be trusted, he knew that. But he wasn't going to hold stuff like that over Draco's head, no matter how much Draco knew about the Dursleys or how often Harry had been to the Infirmary. It just wasn't on.

But he'd thought Draco wasn't a complete arse and hoped they could be friends. They'd gotten along for the most part, except for that run in over the Remembrall, so it had hurt more than Harry wanted to admit when Draco had laughed at him in class earlier today, when he couldn't answer any of Snape's questions. As if he'd have any idea what those things were. He'd gotten his books at Diagon Alley with Hagrid and barely had the chance to crack them, with all the chores and glares and the rest of it he'd dealt with for the remainder of the summer before the Dursleys dumped him at King's Cross. He'd read ahead what he could since getting to Hogwarts, but with all his detentions, plus getting used to the castle and classes and magic, and now with Quidditch, too, he hardly had enough time to breathe some days, never mind memorize the Potions text.

Besides, Teddy told him later that none of that stuff was even in the first third of the book, and he shouldn't have been expected to know any of it yet. How Miss Bloody Granger knew it all was anyone's guess. Teddy had a few theories, mostly having to do with her living the library, with books for pillow, blanket, bed and even the loo . . . the latter made of History of Magic books, of course.

Harry had been grateful to Teddy, and had avoided Draco for the rest of the day. He noted Crabbe and Goyle snickered right along with Draco, same with Zabini and Pansy Parkinson. But not Millicent, not Teddy, and not Neville Longbottom or even Ron. Instead, the red head had looked almost . . . angry at Snape, and on Harry's behalf! The thought had lightened his mood, which had plunged rather deeply as Snape mocked him in front of everyone. He'd thought the man would be fair; he'd said he didn't play favorites, hadn't he? That

was the most disappointing thing about the class, in the end. And he'd been looking forward to Potions, too.

Looking into the bin, now, Harry saw he was more than half through his work after only an hour. Maybe he'd get a chance to actually study tonight with his group, instead of having to get up early and do his work in bed. Tomorrow was Saturday, though, so maybe they'd quit the study group early in favor of hanging out or playing Exploding Snap or Wizard's Chess.

It was just after nine when he finally finished, bottles of ground beetles lined up precisely and the table wiped down. He closed the door, unsure if he needed to lock it again, or if would happen automatically, and decided to just leave it shut like that, for surely Snape would have told him if he needed to do anything special when he left.

He headed back to the Slytherin common room, passing through several twisting corridors on the way. It was easy to get lost down here. Easier than the rest of the castle anyway. The torches – spelled to stay lit all the time – didn't give off as much light as one might hope, when wandering through dungeons, and the flickering light made shadows appear in odd places, so sometimes you could miss a turn or a recessed alcove you needed to take.

Harry was mostly used to it by now, but his thoughts were still running away from him with all that had happened over the last few days, and he didn't realize until he hit a dead end that he'd missed a cross passage somewhere.

Turning to retrace his steps, he found himself face to . . . translucent face with the Bloody Baron.

Silvery blood covered the Bloody Baron's hands and clothes, and his face, also splashed with a streak of silver, was caught in an expression of deep pain. A gaping hole in his chest leaked a never ending flow of that silver blood, dripping toward the floor, but then it winked out of existence before actually hitting the stone. Chains wrapped the ghost's torso and rattled ominously, even while he hovered right in front of Harry.

"Harry Potter," the ghost intoned.

Harry had seen a number of Hogwarts ghosts in the last week, but not the Bloody Baron, not since the Welcoming Feast. He'd felt the ghost's gaze studying him that night, but he'd been so nervous about everything else that he'd quite forgotten. Now he said, "Yes, sir?"

The ghost's mouth curved, opening wide like a rictus more than a smile. "I did not expect you, of all people, to find a place in my House."

With an almost impatient sigh, Harry said, "Yeah, I get that a lot."

Surprising him, the Bloody Baron tipped his head back and laughed, a full-throated joyous sound that made Harry's head reel. "Ah, Mr. Potter, thank you," the Bloody baron said as he wound down. "I have not found such amusement in a stone's age."

"Er, you're welcome." Harry peered through the ghost at the corridor behind him, at the same wondering if doing so was considered rude. "Could you, er, tell me where I ended up? I seem to be a bit lost."

"I should say so."

Harry was pretty sure the Bloody Baron wasn't talking about just tonight, but he didn't feel like getting into some kind of weird philosophical discussion with a ghost, so he ignored that jibe and said, "I'm meant to be back at my common room, now. For a study group."

"Of course," the Bloody Baron said and stared into his eyes. The ghost's eyes were black holes, like the entrance to a cave in which something deadly lived and breathed and drew unwary victims in.

A cold feeling enveloped Harry from toes to ears. He shivered and backed away from the ghost, until he came flush against the wall behind him. "What do you want?"

"What we all want, Mr. Potter." The dark caves narrowed, trapping the lurking danger inside. "Peace."

With that, the ghost floated right through Harry, raising goosebumps all over his skin and making him feel bloody and exhausted and bruised, as if he'd been in a fight. One he'd lost. But before Harry could turn or make a sound or call him back to explain himself, the Baron vanished through the wall behind him.

Harry leant against the wall for a long moment, catching his breath. Using the smooth, damp stone for support, he forced his feet to move, one after the other, until he was well away from that cul de sac. It took forever, it seemed like, before he finally reached an area he recognized. Aside from still panting a little and with a trace of a hitch in chest when he breathed, he was mostly recovered by the time he entered the common room at last – or as much as he could be after being run through by a ghost. He made his way directly to the table he and his study group used each night. . . but no one was there.

And the common room was oddly quiet, too, especially for this first Friday. Only a few older students lurked about in corners . . . including a couple snogging in the shadows near the corridor to the girls' dorm. Harry had expected a lot more activity. Wouldn't everyone be excited about the end of the first week of school? Teddy had said as much, when commiserating with Harry over his week's worth of detentions.

Checking the time on the mantel clock over the fireplace, though, Harry shocked, but he understood why it was so quiet. How in the world had it gotten to be 2 am?

It had been the Bloody baron, he was sure of it. Something weird had happened when the ghost went through him. But he didn't remember anything . . .

"Potter!" a voice said behind him, and Harry jumped, turning around for the second time that night to face something less than pleasant. This time, the person was very much alive, and very, very angry. Snape continued, "To what do I owe . . ." before he suddenly trailed off, eyes widening. "Come with me," he ordered, then turned on his heel and marched back out the portrait door and along the corridor toward his office.

More exhausted than he could ever explain, Harry just sighed and trailed after him, through the dark corridors, and through the door that slammed open to admit them both to Snape's office.

Snape pointed at the chair in front of his desk. "Sit." Harry did, watching as Snape opened the door behind his desk that led to his private potion stores and stormed in there. He returned a minute later with several bottles which he placed in a row in front of Harry at the edge of the desk. "Remove your shirt."

"Sir?"

"Do it now, Potter. You are covered in blood. I wish to discover if any of it is yours."

Harry looked down at himself for the first time since the Bloody Baron had slid through him. To his horror and disgust, the front of his robe was soaked with blood, as was the button down shirt underneath. He peeled both away from his skin, making a face as the shirt stuck to him and he had to yank it away. Doing so stung, and he winced.

"What, pray tell, have you run afoul of this time?" Snape asked as Harry pulled off his robe and let it fall to the floor. His fingers shook as he undid the buttons on his shirt, and then he saw that they too – no, his whole hands! – were red and tacky with blood.

"I . . . I don't know, sir," he said, starting to tremble as the coppery tang of the blood hit his nose and the pulse of his heart sounded extra loud in his ears. He could almost feel it flowing through his veins. Lub dub. Lub dub. It wasn't until his shirt was open and he saw the deep gouge in his chest that he realized at least some of the blood was his own. And then the pain hit, and somewhere in his mind was a little voice telling him he was in shock and that's why he hadn't felt anything before, but in the next second, he locked eyes with Snape, shook his head uncomprehendingly, and dropped like a stone as the world turned black.

TBC . . .

A/N: A full departure from canon events of first year in this chapter, obviously. Hope that's okay with everyone . . . I should have a new chapter (in Snape's pov) out by the weekend. Big Snapalicious hugs for all who read and review! Thank you for your support.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 12

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Alas.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

And then the pain hit, and somewhere in his mind was a little voice telling him he was in shock and that's why he hadn't felt anything before, but in the next second, he locked eyes with Snape, shook his head uncomprehendingly, and dropped like a stone as the world turned black.

Severus managed to catch the boy before he hit his head on the stone floor, but only because he'd had years of honing his reflexes amongst negligent children and their exploding cauldrons. His next instinctive action was to stop the bleeding from the now-obvious chest wound.

He laid the Brat Who Lived to Give Him Heart Attacks out flat on the floor, cast a single Scourgify on the wound and once the wound was clean, closed it quickly with a swish of his wand. Next he checked to make sure the boy was still breathing and that he had a pulse.

The pulse was thready, but there, and the boy's breaths were rapid and shallow. He then pinched hard on one of Potter's earlobes, and the color did not return as quickly as it should. Damn. To keep the boy from dying of shock, Severus cast a single Warming Charm on the area to combat the dampness of the dungeon, then transfigured the chair and an empty jar into a heavy blanket and a thick pillow. The former of these he wrapped loosely around the boy, including underneath, adding another Warming Charm, and the latter he slid under Potter's feet.

Having staved off death for the next few seconds, Severus took a half moment to firecall Madam Pomfrey from the Floo to the right of his desk.

As he did so, he wondered why the hell had this boy been up wandering the halls at two o'clock in the morning. Especially since, according to the monitors on Severus' classroom and office, Potter had finished with his detention a good five hours before then.

Pushing those questions – which he would have answered, damnit! – from his mind as soon as she answered, he let Poppy know in a few terse words that her presence – along with at least one Blood Replenishing Potion – was required in his office. He hurried back to the boy as she gathered supplies and came through the Floo.

Potter's face was white as chalk, and wet with perspiration, but when Severus felt his forehead, he found it clammy. His pulse was still weak, but had not deteriorated, at least, and he was still breathing, though he had not regained consciousness.

A moment later, Poppy was beside him, and he told her about the chest wound and what he'd already done to prevent the shock from worsening. She nodded, and rather than pour the Blood Replenisher down the boy's throat, spelled it directly to his stomach, then followed it with another potion . . . he recognized it as one of his own. Blood Replenisher, but with a dose of dopamine, specifically for shock victims. Finally, she cast a spell to increase the concentration of oxygen in the air directly above the boy's nose and mouth.

"Now we just need to watch and wait," Poppy said with a sigh. She gave him a hard look. "Dare I ask what brought him to this?"

"I have no idea."

"Tell me what you do know."

The boy's breathing had evened out, and when Severus felt for the pulse again, he was glad to find it more steady than it had been ten minutes ago, though still weaker than it should be. His relief made him more forthcoming than usual as he related the events that led up

their present situation. If pressed, he would say he rambled. "I had an alarm go off in my quarters, alerting me that one of my students had opened the portrait door to their common room from the outside. When I investigated, I found Potter, standing in the middle of the room looking . . . lost." He couldn't find the right words to describe the look in the boy's eyes when he'd spoken his name and he had turned to look at Severus. "Haunted" was almost right.

"I was about to ask him what the hell he was doing out of bed when I noticed his robes were covered in blood. He was standing, though, so I made him follow me here, to question him. I assumed . . ." He trailed off. He'd assumed since the boy was mobile, he was fine and had gotten someone else's blood on him, somehow. He hadn't thought the boy was bleeding out, for Merlin's sake. Did Potter have no sense of self-preservation?

"And then?" Poppy prompted.

"And then I told him to sit," he pointed, "right there, and to remove his robe and shirt so I could see if he was hurt. He did, and he was, and when I asked him what he had run afoul of, he claimed he didn't know and then fell to the floor."

"And you have no idea how he came to be injured?"

"None!"

"All right, Severus. Don't get your knickers in a twist." She frowned at the boy. "Do you know why he didn't check in with me today?"

Severus scowled. "He didn't?"

"No."

"The little—"

Poppy cleared her throat before he could finish the sentiment. "I wouldn't be too hard on him," she said. "I imagine he had quite enough of my company the last few days. Do you know if he has been drinking the nutritive potion?"

“Yes, I made sure of that.”

“Good.” She leant over and checked Potter’s pulse again and nodded to herself. “He’s stable enough to move. I want to get him to the Infirmary.”

“Very well.” Severus Levitated the boy’s body and followed the Medi-witch out of his office and upstairs. They had hit the second floor when a huge crashing sound startled them both. Severus’ wand was already out, but he was surprised to see Poppy now clutching hers, and blocking the boy’s floating body as much as she could from where she stood.

A few seconds later, the cause of the ruckus became apparent as Peeves flew out of a classroom down the hall and, screeching to high heaven, careened toward them. His laughter was more . . . ebullient than Severus had ever heard it.

“His Bloodiness is sick today,

“Letting Peevesy out to play!” the poltergeist howled, and then hurled gobs of some sticky, pale green substance at them as he sped by.

Severus ducked automatically, and heard a wet, pulpy splat hit the floor just behind him. The green ooze sank into the floor, leaving only a damp spot, as it did everywhere it touched, except where it hit the wool of the Transfigured blanket wrapped around Potter. There, of course, it started to smoke and hiss as if acidic. Severus jabbed his wand at the offending ectoplasm and snarled, “Scourgify.” Thankfully, the ooze vanished before eating through to the Potter Brat’s skin.

Madam Pomfrey scurried ahead to the Infirmary and inside, then led Severus and his Levitated bundle to one of the beds closest to her office.

There, they made Potter as comfortable as possible, while still keeping his feet elevated. After casting a Warming Charm on his bed, Poppy unwrapped him from the blanket so she could clean him up and get him into non-blood soaked clothes.

Severus stayed to watch her work. He was just making sure the Brat wasn't going to die, he told himself. And he wanted to be sure he could ask his questions when the boy regained consciousness. It wasn't because he needed to reassure himself about the boy's well-being, or make sure Potter wasn't frightened when he woke. Not at all.

More than two hours passed before Potter's eyes flickered and his breaths – which had deepened significantly after Poppy spelled a pain relief draught into his belly – came more rapidly. A few minutes later, and he blinked his eyes open and stared around him, with that same lost, haunted look. Then those green eyes widened considerably when the boy saw who was sitting beside his bed. Even so, the boy fumbled for glasses weakly for a moment before Severus snatched them up and put them in his hand.

"Thank you, sir." Potter's voice was dry, rasping. He unfolded the dark frames and hooked them over his ears. His face was still pale, but not the grayish hue it had been earlier.

"Thirsty?" Severus asked.

"Yes, sir."

Severus poured a cup of water for him and then helped him sit up. "Sip it slowly," he told the boy.

Potter took several sips before he said, "I'm in the Infirmary, sir?"

"Yes," Severus said slowly and let the boy finish his water. After he took the cup and placed it on the side table, he said, "And now, perhaps you can tell me what transpired this evening to cause such an uproar on your behalf."

"Sorry, sir?"

"How did you manage to carve open your chest and bleed out half your blood?"

Potter's eyes widened. "I don't know, sir."

“You have no idea how—”

“Severus!” Poppy was at the boy’s bedside, hand on her hips and glaring. At him! “Do not badger my patient! If you can’t remain calm, you have no place in my Infirmary.”

Severus gave her a brief nod of acknowledgement. He knew she was right, but he needed to get to the bottom of this. To let Albus know what had truly transpired if nothing else. Severus had sent the Headmaster a quick message, right after they’d come to the Infirmary, but they would need more information about who was trying to kill the Savior of the Wizarding World, and soon. “Very well. Mr. Potter, if you would please tell me what you do know about this evening. Where, for instance, were you coming from at 2am?”

“I don’t know, sir. I mean,” he continued quickly when he saw Severus’ expression, “I didn’t realize so much time had passed. I finished detention and then walked back to the common room, except I got lost, and then the Baron was there, and—”

“Wait,” Severus interrupted, his eyes narrowing. “You saw the Bloody Baron?”

“Yes, sir, and then he flew through—”

“When was this?”

“Well, right after I realized I’d missed a turn. Just after nine, I think.”

Severus pursed his lips and considered. Peeves’ chants rang in his ears, and what had he said, about the Baron being sick? “Did he look different to you, Potter?”

“Different? I don’t know.” The boy twisted his hands together, and Poppy gave Severus a baleful look, so he tried to stop scowling. But it was very difficult. “I mean, I’d only seen him at the Welcome Feast before, so I’m not sure if he was different. But then he said some stuff and flew right through me into the wall.”

The Baron had flown through him? Is that how the wound had appeared? But Severus had never heard of any ghost ever having any physical affect on a living being, except to maybe make them feel cold. But if not that, then how had the Potter Brat gotten the wound? "And then?"

"And then I went back to the common room."

"And nothing attacked you on the way?"

"No . . ."

Severus grabbed at the boy's hesitation as if it were a Featherfall Charm while he was in the process of careening headfirst off a cliff. "But?"

"Well, after the Bloody Baron was gone, I felt really tired, and sore, like I'd been in a fight. But I couldn't remember anything about it. And it felt like it took a long time to find my way back."

Hmmm. Severus drew his wand and in one lazy motion determined that, yes, the boy had been Obliviated recently. "It seems, Mr. Potter, that your memories of the events of this evening have been tampered with."

"Sorry, sir?"

Severus grimaced. "You were Obliviated." He clarified further, when the boy's look of confusion deepened. "Someone cast a spell upon you, erasing or otherwise rearranging your memories. I would guess erasing, as you seem to have nothing to replace the missing time. Oblivate is not an easy spell; it is not taught in regular curriculum." The ramifications of that were apparent to Severus, but probably not to the boy.

"So, it wasn't a student, then."

Huh. Potter was brighter than he looked. And, for some reason, he didn't seem all that upset -- or surprised -- that he'd been the target of

a fairly nasty spell. Maybe he was still riding a dopamine high. "It's highly unlikely."

"But who would do that?"

"That is the question of the hour," Severus said. "The second being, why didn't you keep your appointment with Madam Pomfrey?"

The boy's mouth gaped open like a fish. "I, er . . ."

"She was very explicit in her instructions. I thought we were all quite clear that you were to check in with her today . . . or rather, yesterday afternoon. I believe, as well, that you and I have had a multitude of discussions on your inability to follow directions. Do we need to have yet another?"

Potter hung his head. "No, sir. 'M'sorry."

Severus watched him for a long moment, the twisting hands, the anxiety and shame writ large in his eyes, and he sighed. "I . . . understand if you are unused to receiving medical treatment," he said quietly. "You are accustomed to dealing with your own injuries, are you not?"

A head nod, and a quiet, "Yes, sir."

"As I thought. Here, however, you come under my purview, and I am not in the habit of letting students in my House disregard their health or well-being. You will attend your check-ins with Madam Pomfrey in the future, is that clear? Else you and I will have many long and tedious words on the subject."

"Yes, sir," almost a whisper.

"Good." He rose from his chair. "Get some rest. It is Saturday, and you have no reason to leave this bed unless Madam Pomfrey allows it." He glanced in her direction, and she gave him a look that spoke volumes about the likelihood that Potter would be out of her clutches before the end of the weekend, never mind later today.

“Good night, Mr. Potter.”

“Good night, Professor,” the boy said, and leaned back heavily on his pillows, eyes closed already.

And so Severus went in search of the Bloody Baron, to get some answers from the old ghost. After two hours of searching and calling, however, he was unable to make contact with the ghost, and so, quite exhausted from the night's events, he made his way back to his quarters in rather a foul mood. He fell asleep almost immediately and suffered dreams of violence and bloodshed, such as he had not in over ten years.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks everybody for not killing me over the cliffie. I love you all, you know that, right? Right? Huge Harry hugs for all who read and review! Thank you for your support.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 13

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. pout

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

“Good night, Mr. Potter.”

“Good night, Professor,” the boy said, and leaned back heavily on his pillows, eyes closed already.

Harry did not wake again until afternoon, and then slowly, blinking heavily through gummy lids. It took long minutes for him to remember where he was: the school Infirmary. Again. After fumbling a moment for his glasses, he leaned back and stared at the ceiling far above him. The white ceiling had numerous patterns in it, whirls and dots and cones in the plaster or stone or whatever it was made of, and he traced some of these with his gaze as he tried to remember what had happened the night before.

He had a clear picture in his mind of the corridor where he'd met the Baron, and then the odd conversation with the ghost, but he felt -- like he had somewhat last night -- like he'd been missing some parts of it, as if the Bloody Baron was responding to things Harry hadn't said. And he remembered the aching, tired feeling -- still present, even after Madam Pomfrey's healing and potions -- after the Baron was gone, and the long trek back to the Slytherin common room. He could not remember, at all, how he'd come to have the chest wound and lose all that blood.

And Snape . . . he could have sworn, for a split second while they'd been talking in his office, before Harry had fainted -- and wasn't that going to be a joy to live down! -- that he'd seen concern in the man's

eyes. Harry knew better than to think adults -- any adults -- could ever be concerned for a burdensome freak like himself, so he wondered what Snape was playing at. He also knew better than to display weakness, experience had taught him that showing any signs of a "soft white underbelly" was like begging to have it ripped open by dogs.

Madam Pomfrey appeared beside him, pulling him from his musings, and he gave her a small smile. She returned it, a little wryly, shaking her head as she handed him a potion in an opaque bottle. He took it from her but did not drink. "Mr. Potter. I would appreciate it if you could spend a good portion of the rest of the school year not under my care."

"M'sorry," he told her and ducked his head, watching her through his fringe.

Her eyes narrowed. "I do not mean it like that, young man. I merely dislike seeing you requiring treatment again. I believe you have quite enough to be going on with, just getting used to magic and a new school, without throwing blood loss and shock into the mix. Now, drink that; it's to aid your body in replenishing your blood."

He tipped the potion back, shuddering at the metallic taste -- almost like blood, except with an after burn.

She handed him another potion, this one orange, in a clear bottle. "This is for pain. It's not as strong as the ones I dosed you with last night, but if you need something more, you will let me know."

He wouldn't, but he nodded anyway. "Yes, ma'am."

Her eyes narrowed again, like she knew what he was thinking, but Harry just smiled innocently and poured the potion into his mouth. This one was nasty tasting, like phlegm and almost as thick, but he drank it all down. Once it hit his belly, a warm feeling spread through him, loosing the tight muscles in his shoulders, neck and back, and he sighed gratefully.

Madam Pomfrey watched him, nodded, and took back the empty bottles. "Please let me know if you need anything, Mr. Potter. It is what I am here for, after all."

"Yes, ma'am."

She sighed then shook her head. "You had some visitors earlier. A Mister Nott and Miss Bullstrode. They seemed to think they could fritter away the entirety of the afternoon at bedside. I sent them out, but I daresay they will return." She gestured to the bedside table, where several Get Well cards stood on end, along with a couple boxes of what looked like Chocolate Frogs and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. "And you have some gifts from those who hope you're well enough to leave soon."

"Am I?"

"Not by a long shot. Tomorrow evening will be soon enough, if you are recovered sufficiently." Her gaze sharpened, and he could not help but be caught by it. "You did almost die, after all, Mr. Potter."

"I did?"

"Yes. If Professor Snape had not found you and administered treatment for your shock, it is unlikely we would be having this conversation. You should have come to me immediately. Did you not realize you had been injured?"

"No, ma'am. I was tired, but . . ." He shrugged. "Not until he had me take off my robe, and I could see the blood and all."

Madam Pomfrey nodded slightly, her gaze thoughtful. "Well, try and get some more rest," she said. "It will take at least today for your body to make up the rest of the blood you lost. We'll see how you're doing tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

She gave him a brief smile, and went back to her office. Harry reached for the box of Bertie's Beans and read the tag on top of it.

“Get Well Soon, Harry. From Slytherin House.” He knew that when normal people were sick or in hospital, they often got treats and cards and such from friends and family. When Dudley had his tonsils out, for instance, he’d gotten so many new toys and treats, he’d been swimming in them for weeks. But Harry had never been given anything like this before. Of course, he’d never gotten a real present at all before, until Hagrid gave him Hedwig. It made him feel . . . weird. Pleased? Embarrassed? He wasn’t sure.

Instead of thinking any more about it, he opened the box and picked out a cream-colored bean. Mmm, coconut. His second one was pink and tasted of grapefruit; a little sour, but good. Maybe this was a batch of just good tasting ones. The next one he tried, though, a light green, was brussels sprout, and he almost spit it out. There went that theory.

He picked up one of the boxes of Chocolate Frogs next – as there were two – and the card said, “Hurry up and get out of there, Harry, ‘cuz I miss your Charms. From, Millie.”

Harry grinned. He liked Millicent; she had a good sense of humor and was awful protective of people – like him – who stood up for her in turn. He was looking forward to seeing her later, and Teddy, too. He got along real well with Teddy, though the skinny boy was sometimes hard to figure out. And the way he stood up for Harry, with Zabini, especially . . . well, it was the first time Harry had ever had anyone do that for him, too.

Harry nibbled on a frog – the card was of Dumbledore, who he already had three of – and looked at one of the free standing cards. One of them was from the Slytherin Quidditch team, and as far as he could tell, everyone who was currently on the team – Marcus Flint, Terrence Higgs, Adrian Pucey, Nathan Bole and Miles Bletchley – had signed it. Some of them – notably Higgs and Flint – had also jotted a bit about how Harry had better be up on his broom for practices this week, or else. Harry had to smile. Even vaguely threatening, the card was cool, with zooming snitches and bludgers all over it. And it gave Harry a feeling of belonging to something, which he had been wanting so badly when he first arrived here.

The second card was signed by all his year mates, including Draco and – even more surprisingly – Zabini. He wondered what they'd had to give him to get him to sign. A few possibilities occurred, and Harry snickered to himself while reaching for the second box of Chocolate Frogs. There was no tag or card on this one at all. Weird. He moved things around on the small table, in case it had fallen off, but there was no tag or anything like it to be found. Harry placed the box carefully to the side, a little leery of opening it, without knowing who it was from. Maybe Madam Pomfrey knew. He'd ask her later. It would be a shame to not eat the Frogs, just because someone had forgotten to sign the gift.

He considered the possibilities of who might have left the unsigned gift, and decided it was probably Teddy. He'd ask him later, if he and Millicent really came to see him.

He slept a little more, and late that afternoon, when he was nearly ready to scream with boredom, they did visit. Teddy had thoughtfully brought his book bag and the homework assignments he had for the weekend.

"Aww, you shouldn't have," Harry said.

Teddy snickered. "Well, if you'd rather stare at the ceiling some more instead . . ."

"No! No, it's okay. It's a lovely gesture, thanks." Harry grinned. "Although, Millie gave me candy." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Millicent blush.

"Prat. I don't give candy to whiners."

"Whiners!"

"Yeah, all whimpering and needing coddling and stuff." Teddy grinned. "I mean, why should a knife through the chest keep you in bed for the weekend, huh? It's not like you had a hangnail or something serious like that."

Harry frowned. "How do you know it was a knife through the chest? I don't even know what it was."

"Oh, you know," Teddy said with a vague wave. "That's the rumor. You did look pretty awful in the common room, from what I heard. Bled all over the place, according to one of the sixth years. Not that any of those wankers noticed until Snape hurried you out of there."

"Yeah, there were a couple people snogging in the corner. Didn't look like I made much of an impression."

"So what did happen?" Millicent asked. "Some of the older Snakes are saying you did something to the Bloody Baron. He hasn't been seen since yesterday."

"And Peeves is taking advantage of it, no end," Teddy added. "Supposedly the Bloody Baron's the only one who can control him. He's been pranking everyone, especially the Puffies. I think that's 'cause he can make them cry or something." Teddy shook his head as if that was about the saddest thing in the world.

Harry shrugged. "Well, I saw him, the Bloody Baron, and he said some stuff and flew through me, but I didn't do anything to him." He wasn't about to tell them about the time he'd lost or how he had no idea how he'd gotten all beat to crap and run through; he wasn't stupid.

"Ewww." Millicent wrinkled up her nose. "He flew through you? What did it feel like?"

"It was kinda weird. Cold, but . . ." He shook his head, not sure how to explain.

"Maybe he stabbed you."

"Don't be dense, Millie," Teddy said with a sneer. "Ghosts can't interact like that with corporeal beings. They have no ability to physically manifest."

At her blank look, Harry offered, "He couldn't have hit me with anything, 'cause he can't hold a weapon," and she nodded in understanding.

Teddy gave him a shrewd look. "And you have no idea what happened."

Harry sighed. "No . . . I think I got knocked out by something."

"Maybe the Baron gave you his wound!" Millicent said, "When he passed through you. I mean, everyone knows he's got a chest wound, too, like from a long knife or sword or something."

"Bullstrode," Teddy started testily, "Remember the part about ghosts being non-corporeal?"

"Yeah, but—"

"There's just no way. Besides, why would he do that to a Slytherin? He's our ghost."

"Well, why would anyone . . ." Millicent cut herself off and looked away.

"What?" Harry asked, but Millicent just shrugged. "What . . . Do you mean, why would anyone want to kill me? I dunno."

"Are you kidding me?" Teddy asked. "There's plenty of people who are probably hostile about your return to the Wizarding World, now, after what you did to You Know Who."

"Which I don't even remember, being I was only a year old. And he tried to kill me first."

"Hell, I know that. And there's not like to be anyone stupid enough in Slytherin to try to take you down, at least not at school. Their families would suffer, for one thing. Even Malfoy's not that dim."

"He doesn't like me, though."

“Yeah, well . . . he might’ve found out you made the Quidditch team, without even trying out for it.” Teddy gave Millicent a pointed look.

The large girl flushed. “I didn’t know it was supposed to be a secret! I thought it was great that one of us Firsties had made the team. No one as young as you has made it in a hundred years. I heard Snape had to get the rules bent for you, and everything.” Harry frowned, not liking the idea of Snape doing that for him, and she sighed. “And Malfoy was being a jerk. Again. And going on about how he was guaranteed a spot, likely as Seeker, and so I told him off.” She grimaced and hitched up one shoulder. “Sorry, Harry. He might have got a bit annoyed by the news.”

Harry made himself smile. “Hey, it’s okay, Millie, really. He was going to find out sooner or later anyway, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So, it was a bit sooner. Maybe he’ll even make the team anyway. We still need another Chaser, from what Flint said.” Harry was almost hoping he would; it would take some of the pressure off him, for one thing.

“Oh, hey! Did you know your dad played Quidditch?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I saw a plaque in the trophy room. He played for Gryffindor, obviously, but I guess he was pretty good. They won a lot, then.”

“You’ll have to show me.” Harry’s interest was piqued; he knew so little about his parents that any tidbit of information was worth its weight in galleons. He licked his lips nervously, but made himself ask, “Was there a picture?”

Millie shook her head. “There’s a couple team pictures from back that far, but not one with your father in it.”

Harry swallowed his disappointment, but it felt like ground glass going down. The Dursleys had been so close mouthed about Lily and

James Potter while he was growing up, except when they were telling him lies, like about how they'd died, that he knew next to nothing about them. He didn't even have any idea what they looked like, as the only photos in the Dursley home had been of his aunt and uncle and Dudley, so a picture of even just his father would have eased some of that empty ache he always carried with him. "Oh, well," he said lightly. "It'd be great to see the plaque and stuff anyway."

"Yeah, soon as you're up and around, I'll show you."

"Thanks, Millie." Harry rubbed a hand over his face, feeling suddenly exhausted, so of course Madam Pomfrey had to arrive at that moment and shoo his friends away.

"You can come back briefly, after dinner," she told them when Millicent asked. "But he needs rest more than anything."

"All right. Seeya, Harry," Millie said and waved as they headed for the door.

"Seeya. Thanks for coming by."

Teddy smirked. "See that you quit your whinging, and maybe I'll bring you a nice treat from dinner."

"Well, okay. Just 'cause you asked so nicely. Prat."

The two of them laughed and Harry closed his eyes when they were gone, thinking about what they'd said, about Peeves, and the Bloody Baron, and even Draco. Was the boy's hostility as simple as that Draco was jealous, or was it more sinister?

According to Snape, it was highly unlikely that any student could have Obliviated him – and the idea that someone had wiped his memories was enough to break him out in goosebumps again, just thinking about it – which left the teachers and staff. But who among them would do such a thing, and why? Was someone trying to get back at him for defeating Voldemort?

And why would they erase his memories and just not make sure to kill him completely?

After a while of his thoughts turning in circles, bringing him no closer to any answers, Harry pulled his book bag over and started working on his Potions essay, figuring the least he could do was try his best to stay out of Snape's bad graces. Not sure how successful he'd be after the nasty way Snape had treated him in class, he still had to try.

TBC . . .

A/N: Big Snapalicious hugs for all who read and review! (He could too give hugs; you just have to put up with some post-hug snarkery!) And thank you for your support.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 14

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. pout

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

And so Severus went in search of the Bloody Baron, to get some answers from the old ghost. After two hours of searching and calling, however, he was unable to make contact with the ghost, and so, quite exhausted from the night's events, he made his way back to his quarters in rather a foul mood. He fell asleep almost immediately and suffered dreams of violence and bloodshed, such as he had not in over ten years.

Severus only checked in on the Brat Who Caused Uproars once more in the Infirmary, on Saturday afternoon. Nott and Bullstrode were in attendance and the three of them seemed to be getting along well, which was a surprise. From what he could tell, Theodore Nott was intelligent, cultured and soft-spoken, whereas Miss Bullstrode was his opposite in almost every way. And yet . . . both seemed enamoured of the Brat Who Lived Again enough to put aside their own differences in his favor.

Curious.

After that, he continued his search for the Bloody Baron, questioning the other castle ghosts, but none of them had any idea where the Baron had got to either. Thus, Severus and the rest of the staff spent too much time running interference with Peeves, now that the Baron was absent -- forever? he wondered. Surely not! -- and the rest of his weekend was spent grading and assigning detentions to students who used Peeves as an excuse for their own antics.

He was surprised when the Brat showed up at his office on Sunday night.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Severus asked immediately, scanning the boy without appearing to look up from his grading. Potter was pale and peaky, still, but upright, which was an improvement.

"Detention, sir. I missed last night."

Severus rolled his eyes. Merlin, protect us. "Of course you did," he said with a sneer. "You were rather incapacitated."

The Brat held his ground. "But I have it for a week, sir, you said. And I'm feeling better now. Madam Pomfrey let me out."

"And what were her instructions when she did?"

Potter had the grace to look abashed. "That I should check in with her tomorrow."

"And?"

A sigh. "And that I should go to bed upon my release."

Severus waited . . . waited . . .

"Immediately."

"Indeed." Severus lifted his gaze at last. "Is it really so difficult to obey simple directives, Potter?"

"No, sir."

"I beg to differ. You have consistently gone against the advice and requirements of Madam Pomfrey and myself, often to your own detriment, I might add. I am curious as to your reasoning. Is it just that you consider yourself above the rules? Or do you truly have some sort of aberrant mind that the very concept of doing what you're told does not even occur to you?"

The boy set his jaw, with that slight lift to it that Severus had seen on his first day, a defensive maneuver, to be sure, but was there something more to it? "I follow the rules."

"When it suits you."

Seemed the Brat had no answer to that. In fact, he looked away, nibbling on his lower lip.

Now they were getting somewhere. Where, Severus had no clue, but he would find out, oh yes. Regarding the boy through narrowed eyes, he considered what to do with him. Clearly there was a pattern to the Brat's regular dismissal of the edicts of others, and Severus would need to determine what that was, precisely. "For this evening's detention, I require an essay of no less than two feet, due tomorrow night. The essay will contain an explanation from you on which rules you feel it behooves you to follow, and which it does not, citing examples from both Hogwarts and your home in Surrey. You are dismissed."

For the space of three, maybe four heartbeats, Severus was almost sure the Brat Who Confounded Him would protest, or refuse to follow the very simple order to leave, but then Potter nodded, said, "Yes, sir," and escaped the office without looking back.

Severus sighed and went back to his grading.

The next morning's classes were under constant interruption by the unfettered poltergeist, so much so that Dumbledore himself had to step in at least once, when Peeves' antics caused an entire roomful of second year Gryffindors to start hexing each other in an effort to get rid of him, right through the robes he had jerked over all of their heads.

At lunch, Severus kindly hid his smirk over the incident from Minerva, as she was none too pleased about the resulting flurry of feathers and thistle down in her classroom, and had spent more than enough time cleaning up after her class.

An extra special surprise was that Professor Quirrell had canceled all his classes for the day, claiming a bout of flu. Having all the Defense students running about in the halls when everyone else was in class was just this short of the best fun Severus had ever borne witness to on a Monday.

But all that aggravation went out of his head completely when, on the way back to his office before his first afternoon class, Severus at last found the Bloody Baron.

The ghost was hovering just in front of his office door, in fact. He looked . . . less substantial than usual, for the Bloody Baron, though the silver streaks of his blood were brighter than ever.

Severus stepped closer, but stayed slightly out of range of touch. If the Baron had turned . . . well, evil, Severus would not present him with an easy target, at least. He did, however, erect a simple privacy ward, so anything spoken here now would remain between only the two of them.

“Severus Snape,” the ghost intoned as it turned to see him. His voice was breathy, almost a whisper, and curiously flat. His eyes were odd, too, dark tunnels with a touch of madness.

“Baron.” Severus inclined his head slightly, but did not lower his gaze. “We’ve been looking for you.”

“The boy . . . is he well?”

“By boy, I presume you mean the Potter child.” The Bloody Baron nodded, barely, and Severus said, “He fares well enough now. But he lost blood, a lot of it. As well as some memories.”

“Ah . . . the fault lies with me. For . . . both of those.”

“Does it?” Severus surreptitiously slid his wand into his hand, though what he could do if the ghost really attacked him, he did not know. “How so?”

“I am . . . unsure.”

“Funny, that’s what Potter said. He remembers you flying through him. . . .”

“I did not . . . fly through him.”

“No?”

“I possessed him.”

“I see,” Severus said, though he did not. He kept his expression carefully blank, and did not lash out as he wanted, but . . . What in the world was going on here? “May I ask why?”

The Baron’s face matched his for blankness, though there was a flash of something in his eyes. “He is a Slytherin.”

“Yes . . .”

“I did not expect it.”

Join the bloody club, Severus thought. “That’s not an answer.”

“There was no time.”

Getting the odd sense he was holding more than one conversation here, Severus said, “No time for what?”

“To aid him . . . in any other way. . . . He is powerful, but weak yet.”

Dammit, this was getting him nowhere. “So . . . Potter was in trouble and you possessed him in order to aid him?”

A ghostly sigh toughed his ears, as if the Baron was pleased he had reached the correct conclusion. “He wishes to return,” the Baron said in that same oddly flat tone, but there was nonetheless a note of urgency to his next statement. “And we cannot let him.”

“Potter?” Severus shook his head, even as the Baron did. “You mean whoever attacked Potter. And someone did attack him, didn’t they?”

“Yessss.”

“Who?”

“I cannot say.”

Severus frowned. What was this, then? “Are you unable to say? That is, whoever attacked the boy . . .”

“Confunded us, yesss. After we blocked or repelled his curses many times.” The ghost almost smiled, a sight Severus never wanted to see again, he was sure. “Then we drove him away.”

“How?”

“I . . . we . . .” The pale being looked down at his silver-blood covered hands. “There may have been fire.”

“Fire.”

“Yesss. And . . . a wind. I cannot be sure.”

Severus snapped, “I expect it’s a bit of a blur, is it?”

“Indeed.” The ghost did not appear taken aback at all, but almost . . . repentant. “I had to Obliviate him, you understand.”

“The boy.”

“Yesssss. I was in control . . . he would have . . .”

“Dealt poorly with the aftermath.” Severus sighed and barely refrained from rubbing at his temples in annoyance. He had no doubt at all that if the Brat had known he had been possessed by a ghost, even if it was to help him fight off an attacker, he would have caused even more of a scene. And likely exacerbated the damage already done to him by the “many curses” thrown at him. “And the wound?”

“I did not mean to leave it behind.”

"It was yours? You left your own wound on him when you left his body?"

"It was not my intent." The Baron twisted his hands around, so Severus could see the blood on them. "But I have . . . not done such a thing before. He has recovered, you say?"

"He has. Although, not the memories." He had another way to get at them, but he had not wanted to use it. Not without Dumbledore's permission, at any rate.

The ghost's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Leave them be. He will not do well with that, Severus Snape."

Severus growled, "He will be attacked again and again, unless we discover who was behind this."

The Bloody Baron nodded tiredly. "He will. But . . . let me . . . speak to him first."

"Speak to him? That is all?"

"I do not like this gap in my knowledge," the Baron admitted. "But he is a Slytherin . . . I will not cause him further harm."

Severus regarded him for a long time, judging the verity of his claim. He had known the Bloody Baron a very long time, since Severus had been a child here, in fact, and he had never known the ghost to do anything remotely anti-Slytherin. And though he was usually taciturn, the Baron was not known for saying things he did not mean. "Very well. I should like to be present for this discussion, however."

The Bloody Baron nodded and started to fade backwards, down the corridor.

Severus halted him with a, "Peeves has been quite the troublemaker while you've been away."

The expression on the Bloody Baron's face shifted so quickly that Severus had to keep himself from taking a step back in fear. Rage and a promise of vengeance to come carved into the translucent form like wire. "I was . . . recovering, as well. I shall see to Peeves."

With that, he vanished entirely.

Severus went to the Headmaster immediately, and made a report.

That evening, the Brat showed up on time, with a scroll of parchment that he handed over without a word. His gaze remained on his feet.

Severus put down the scroll. "In my classroom is a bucket of murtlap tentacles which need to be pickled. First, you will cut them in the way specified by my written instructions, and then place them in the vat of brine. Any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Did you check in with Madam Pomfrey today?" He already knew the answer, having received a confirmation from Poppy, but he wanted the boy to acknowledge his own success.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now go."

The boy lifted his head for a brief look, then scampered into the classroom. Severus scooped up the scroll and followed after him, to make sure the Brat had no problems deciphering his instructions. The beetles had been done very well, so he had little concern that the boy could do this one, too. Keeping one ear tuned to the sound of precise slicing, Severus unraveled the scroll and read through it quickly, once, and then more thoroughly a second time.

The first thing that occurred to him was that the boy had to learn better penmanship and soon, or it was going to drive Severus quite mad to have to read any essays he turned in. His second thought was that he was . . . pleased the boy had put in an honest effort. So many children did not, when their work was for detention. Giving almost

three feet of examples and counter examples of his rules-abiding behavior, as well as his reasons for doing so when he understood them, Potter had shown, too, that he had a decent head on his shoulders and was not a complete waste of breath, unlike his father.

Some of the examples of rules Potter did not respect or follow, however, drawn almost entirely from his aunt and uncle's domain, took his breath away.

Apparently, in his home, Potter was expected to do everything he was told, up to and including tasks that put him in the way of serious physical harm, to accept any kind of abuse as his due, and to agree with every nasty and illogical thing he was told about himself, his parents and magic in general.

Severus realized the sound of murtlap separation had ceased, and he looked up to find Potter staring at him, his green eyes hard, the knife still in his hand.

"Is it what you wanted, sir?"

"It is," Severus replied evenly, not rising to the bait of the boy's anger. "And I detect a pattern here. You will obey rules if you agree with them, or if given an even chance to comply."

Potter's eyes narrowed, but he nodded, tightly.

"For example, you have sent away for clothes to replace the ones that I noted were out of regulation. When did you send the owl?"

"The morning after we arrived, sir," Potter said, flushing.

"So, before I even discovered your nightclothes error."

"Yes, sir."

Severus nodded, and he was pretty sure of the next answer, but wanted to know for certain the depth of his own folly. "And so, when you asked about owl orders, during our House meeting . . . you had not forgotten quills or candy, had you."

Potter's jaw tightened, and his hand clenched around the knife. "No, sir."

"Mm." He paused, then, "You wrote that you arrive for classes on time, I see, realizing that not doing so is not only a disservice to yourself, but to your fellow classmates, and is disrespectful to your professors."

"Yes, sir."

"You do all your homework, to the best of your ability, though you have been required, primarily due to detentions, to miss several mandatory meetings with your study group." He peered up at the boy, watching his internal struggle. "Does that bother you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Explain."

"Well, sir, like I wrote, it's not fair to them when I don't show up, 'cause Millie, um, Millicent Bullstrode, she sometimes needs extra help and the others think she's dragging them down on purpose."

"And you do not?"

"No, sir. She can do the material, she just needs . . ." He shrugged.

"Encouragement?"

A brief smile. "Yes, sir."

"I see. But tell me, Potter, aside from the effect your absence has on your peers, Miss Bullstrode in specific, is there any other reason that not attending a mandatory study session should be avoided?"

Potter's frown was troubling, but then it smoothed and Severus released his breath. "Because I might need help, too?"

“Indeed.” He paused, considered his words very carefully, then continued, “There is a pattern readily apparent in your rules violations, Mr. Potter. When you believe that you are the only person to be impacted by a rule that inconveniences you or may lead you to further trouble, you are more likely to disregard it. Take this one for example: the rule of ‘No food until all your chores are done’ has been disobeyed . . . how many times would you say?”

Potter swallowed convulsively and was silent for long enough that Severus could get his own temper under control, for which he was grateful. Just when he was about to prompt the boy again, Potter admitted in a soft voice, “Lots.”

“Why?”

“I was hungry.” The words came out as a whisper, and the knife trembled violently in his hand.

Severus dared only push a little further. He knew the real reason from reading between the lines of the essay, but he wanted the boy to admit it to himself. “Why did you simply not follow the rule? You would have been given food if you finished all your chores.”

Potter shook his head. “Not always, not even if I did finish. And then . . .” His teeth snapped together. Red faced, with eyes bright with shame, he looked away.

“And then?” At the continued silence, Severus sharpened his tone. “If you finished your chores, what then?”

“And then he’d just make a longer list the next day!”

“Ah.” Severus maintained his rigid self-control – which he had prided himself on ever since he was a child himself – with some difficulty. But he did keep his calm façade, and even managed to soften his tone again. “So the rule was not designed for your betterment, nor to keep you from harm, but merely to punish and humiliate you.”

“Yes!” Potter said fiercely, and Severus was glad to see the fight in him.

“And that is the crux of the problem, isn’t it? You see some rules or requirements here at Hogwarts as designed to humiliate or punish you, when they are in fact, for your safety and/or betterment.”

Potter was breathing hard, the knife still gripped tight, but he closed his eyes for a moment and drew a slow breath. Severus watched him regain his temper, and was – almost – impressed.

Keeping a close eye on Potter’s breathing pattern and the flush adorning his cheeks, Severus continued in a quiet voice, “For example, being sent to the Infirmary for a check up. I assure you, neither Madam Pomfrey nor myself has any desire to humiliate you for being in pain or in need of our assistance. We both are working to your betterment, but we can only do so with your cooperation. We discussed this on the weekend, did we not?”

“Yes, sir. I’m in your . . . purview?”

“Yes. As a professor, I have a duty and obligation to make sure every child is healthy in mind and body while he is at Hogwarts. Do you understand what that means?”

Potter nodded, and his words were hesitant, almost sullen. “You weren’t mocking me when you sent me to see Madam Pomfrey.”

“Correct.” Severus glanced down at the scroll. “As well, I never considered you a ‘cry baby’ for seeing to your sore scar, nor a ‘whinging malingerer’ for needing to have a check up afterwards. I assume these are phrases used by others to describe you on an occasion or two?”

Potter was back to using a tight nod, his arms held rigidly by his sides.

With another glance at the scroll, Severus continued, “You also assumed you would get in ‘even more trouble’ by mere fact of visiting the Infirmary. Since I was the one who ordered you to go, with whom would this trouble be?”

The boy shook his head this time, a spark of fear evident in his eyes.

Severus held his gaze. "I should let you know that, as Head of Slytherin House, I also keep tabs on the status of your home life during holidays. I will be asking some of these same questions of your relatives when I visit with them."

"No! You can't!"

Potter was visibly shaken now, but Severus pushed, "I can, Mr. Potter, and I will. Thus, you may as well answer them for me now."

"You can't visit them!" he repeated, sounding almost frantic. "They hate magic and Wizards, and . . . you just can't!"

"I assure you, I have nothing to fear from Muggles. And if they behave themselves, neither should they fear me."

Severus truly meant the reassurance, though he'd left himself a hell of an out concerning his treatment of them, if he needed it later. But he was far more interested to see if the boy would confirm his suspicions, which he did.

In the next second, Potter's face returned to the blank, careless mask he had used several times over the last few days, particularly when he realized he had no escape from a terrible circumstance. "Of course, sir. I meant no offense."

"I know," Severus said quietly. He had not moved from the doorway where he'd begun reading the Brat's scroll, and now he moved forward only one step. Bringing as much understanding to his mien as he could, he waited until Potter was relaxed enough to truly listen. He would make this point understood and unmistakable. "I do not mean to return you to their mercies afterwards without any preparation, on either your part or theirs. If you return to them at all, they will not be allowed to displace their anger towards me, or anything I say to them, upon you. Do you understand this? No child in my House will suffer abuse, even beyond the walls of this school."

Potter's mouth had dropped open, and he now stared at Severus as if he were the devil himself. Potter didn't believe him, fully, he knew, but

was at least willing to hope that things could get better at home. "I . . . um, thank you, sir. . . ."

"But?"

Setting his jaw once more, Potter said, "But they'll deny it. Deny everything. I'm not s'posed to talk about it, you know, about what happens at home. What if . . . what if . . . ?"

"What if I believe them instead?"

"Yes, sir."

Severus smiled tightly. "Magic is good for many things, Mr. Potter, not least in determining the truth of a situation. I assure you, I am very skilled in that arena. Two drops of Veritaserum, for instance . . ." He trailed off, sighed and looked away for a brief moment, then shook his head and decided the boy had suffered enough apathy on his part already. Enough equivocation. Time for him to admit some things, too. "Besides, I already believe you."

TBC . . .

A/N:

Thank you, everyone, for your support! Your continued enthusiasm for this story, your wonderful reviews, and your suggestions and guesses on the current mystery, are like my jam sandwich, thermos of apple juice, and little red box of animal crackers, all packed up nice, in a Scooby-Doo lunch box! Next chapter out by the weekend.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 15

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

He trailed off, sighed and looked away for a brief moment, then shook his head and decided the boy had suffered enough apathy on his part already. Enough equivocation. Time for him to admit some things, too. "Besides, I already believe you."

Harry stared at the Professor, not sure what to think, really, because who ever did believe him? Besides, Snape would change his mind soon enough, if he did go see the Dursleys and they told him all about what a horrible little monstrous freak he was. . . . Harry's stomach clenched at the very thought. He was going to be in six kinds of trouble, come the holidays. He should never have written the essay, just taken a different punishment or something, or he should have lied through his teeth, and just made sure to emphasize what a complete rules-breaking idiot he was, instead of making excuses for his behavior by pointing out the lameness of certain rules.

He'd been stupid, really, and had even neglected his Transfiguration homework this afternoon, in favor of doing the detention work. But, he reasoned, while Professor McGonagall might get annoyed that he had not completed his work, Snape would be downright vicious if he didn't turn in the essay. So the choice was an easy one to make. As had going to detention last night, as Snape had told him previously, instead of to bed as Madam Pomfrey instructed. The ability to prioritize various contradictory orders or rules was a skill he used often, actually. He'd had to, in the Dursley home.

However, he had to admit, the expression of near understanding of Harry's situation that had come over Snape's face when Harry protested his planned visit . . . well, it made the rest almost worth it. It was like Snape knew. He knew what the repercussions would be, to Harry. And – dare he think it? – he almost seemed to care.

Not that it would help Harry in the long run, though.

All the same, he wondered if he could get a hold of some Veritaserum, and if Uncle Vernon was immune to it. He was about to ask if Veritaserum was on the regular curriculum, and when they might brew it, if so, when Snape's head turned away so fast Harry thought he might get whiplash. Harry followed the man's gaze to see a ghost . . . no, not just any ghost, but the Bloody Baron, float through the classroom door.

Harry dropped the knife still clutched his hand. It hit the stone floor with a clang.

The ghost looked over at him, staring with those dark pits he had for eyes, and Harry felt himself trembling. He tried to stop, but his muscles would not quite obey.

Somewhere, he heard the Professor's voice, "I'm not sure this is the best time."

"Nonsense," the Bloody Baron told him, his gaze never wavering from Harry's face. "It's best to just get this out of the way."

Snape sighed. "Very well. But let me procure a Calming Draught at least, or the boy will likely wet himself."

Assuming he was the boy in question, Harry bristled. He'd never wet himself . . . not in fear, anyway, and not for many, many years. He scowled at the Professor, who sneered at him in turn. After a moment, Harry gave him a grim smile and shook his head. Seemed the insult had left him less fearful, and Snape knew it. Huh.

"I'm fine, sir," he said stiffly.

"I'm sure you are."

Harry glared at him again.

The Bloody Baron laughed, a low chuckle that raised the hairs on Harry's arms. "I saw this mettle in you, boy," he said, his voice tinged with humor, still. "The other night." His dark eyes flared with black fire. "It would have been a shame to lose you."

"What . . . what do you mean?"

Still not releasing Harry from his luminous stare, he said, "Surely the good Professor has explained to you what happened? Why your memories of Friday evening were altered?"

"No," Harry said accusingly, dragging his gaze away to meet Snape's eyes once more. "He did not."

Snape glared back. "It was not the best time for that."

"When would be the best time? Sir?"

The Professor's jaw worked and he spat out, "When I had more complete information. Now, it's all just supposition."

"Not all, Severus," the ghost said in an almost chiding tone. "I did lay out some facts for you."

"Please," Harry said, and turned his back to Snape, though it made a shiver run up his spine to do so, and faced the ghost again. "Tell me what you know."

"Very well." The Bloody Baron nodded, with a touch of a smile. "I came to your aid on Friday last, when you were under attack."

"When I was what?"

“Under attack.” The Bloody Baron held up a shimmery, translucent hand. “I am not certain as to the fiend’s identity, but I have a few guesses.”

“Who?” Someone had really tried to kill him? His stomach clenched a bit tighter, and he was almost sure he was going to be sick.

“All in good time,” the Baron said. “I happened to notice your passing, near the quarters of . . . someone long dead, and wondered what had led you to explore so far from home, and thus followed your steps until you reached the seeming end of the corridor. I was, apparently, not the only one to do so, and to my sincere regret, I did not realize that I, too, was being followed. Not until the first curse flew through me, I’m afraid.”

Harry held his breath for a long moment, but the ghost seemed to be waiting for something. “It hit me, though, didn’t it?”

The Bloody Baron nodded. “That would have been the end of it, for you,” he intoned. “The full Body-Bind Curse. You fell over, of course, the perfect victim, and I had little time to consider what I did next.”

“Which was?” Harry asked, although he was almost sure he knew, and he was almost equally sure he was going to sick up all over the classroom floor, right now. He shivered, remembering, the odd, squicky feeling of the ghost running through him, and the cold, clamminess afterwards . . .

“You are a Slytherin, boy, no matter how surprising the fact is, and I could not allow any harm to come to you.” He flicked a glance at Snape and quirked a ghostly eyebrow high. “Rule number one, correct?”

Snape grunted a reply which could be a, “Yes,” or could be a, “Get on with it before I hex you into next week.” It was hard to tell.

“What did you do?” Harry asked again. His hands were formed into fists, clenched by his sides, and the pain of his fingernails digging into his palms was almost enough to steady his voice.

“I assisted you, my boy.” The ghost smiled faintly. “I have never done such a thing before as that, you understand, and was not sure it would actually work—“

“WHAT DID YOU DO?!”

“I took over your body. Briefly. Until the danger passed.”

Harry sucked in a breath. Though he had known, somehow, what the Baron was going to say, his admission still hit Harry in the gut like a kick from an overweight cousin. “And it broke the Binding?” he asked, his voice flat.

“It did. So I turned us around, and we set up blocks and counter curses and sent a few hexes of our own.”

“We?” Harry asked, feeling a little faint.

“My knowledge, your power. And your wand,” he added, as almost an afterthought. “It worked far better than I could have imagined. You have a great deal of power.”

He was definitely going to be ill. Somewhere, in the back part of his brain that wasn’t freaking out, he realized this explained why he had been so sore and tired after losing his way that night, and maybe even explained the wound he had received. “Can any ghost just do that to me?” he asked, hating the way his voice cracked on the question, but needing to know how much danger he was in from possession – for that was what it was, pure and simple – in the future.

“I would not care to speculate,” the Baron started, but then said anyway, “But, no, I do not believe so. You are Slytherin, as I said, and it is only through my affinity to your House that I was able to stay in your body without being instantly repelled.”

“Instantly . . .”

“Repelled.” The ghost’s face sparked brightly, and he gave a slight bow. “You put up a fight worthy of a Gryffindor, Harry Potter, if you’ll

pardon the slur. Against me. And my power on this plane is far superior to most others you will ever meet.”

The words were said without any trace of arrogance, yet Harry believed him wholeheartedly. But maybe he just wanted them to be true. They had to be, right? Oh, god.

“Once I . . . overcame your objections, we were nearly unstoppable.”

“Who was it?” Harry whispered.

“Ah, that . . . I have not been able to piece that together yet.”

“Why not?”

“One of the spells that did manage to get by our defenses was the Confundus Charm. It scrambled my memories quite nicely.”

“And mine.”

For the first time, the Bloody Baron looked uncomfortable. “Yes, quite.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “What else? Did you do something to them?”

A snort from the side reminded Harry that they were having this discussion in front of the Potions Master, and he barely suppressed a flinch, as he’d been hardly respectful through the entire exchange. But worse than the snort was the droll voice saying, “You might as well confess. He’ll figure it out soon enough. The Brat’s not as stupid as he looks.”

The Bloody Baron gave Snape a baleful look, to which Snape merely sneered. The Professor really did have a full array of sneers. Quite impressive, really. Harry wondered how Uncle Vernon would respond to this one, and almost wished he could see it in action, and then realized his mind was wandering and cleared his head with a vicious shake.

“You were saying?” he prompted the Baron.

“Ah, yes. After we’d driven off the criminal who attacked you, and I was about to leave your body, I was concerned you might find the experience a little . . . distressing, and so I removed your memory of the event. A bit ham-handedly, I admit, as I had little time and was still Confunded. In the process, you expelled me from your body and I found myself adrift, with no idea how to return to you. Or to anywhere, really.” The last bit was a low mutter that Harry wasn’t sure he was supposed to have heard.

Harry stared. “Why would you want to get back to me?”

The Bloody Baron gestured to his own chest, where a gaping wound oozed silvery blood in a constant stream. “I inadvertently left you a memento of our joint endeavor.”

Harry put a hand on his robes, where they had been soaked with blood. “My chest.”

“Yes. I learned later that you had sustained damage from the encounter. I must apologize for that, and for not alerting the staff to your location. But I was . . . not myself for several days.”

“I . . .” Harry’s head hurt, with spinning, whirling thoughts, but one thing was perfectly clear: the Bloody Baron had saved his life, from whoever had thrown that first hex. “Don’t worry about it.”

A low chuckle from the Potions Master made Harry spin toward him, which he instantly regretted when the world tilted slightly. Grabbing the edge of the worktable kept him from falling on his face, though. Barely. He held on with both hands, his knuckles turning white, still feeling light headed.

“You see? No sense of self-preservation whatsoever,” Snape said with disgust.

Harry glared at him again, though the Professor had seen him almost get killed twice in the space of two days, though the second time was hardly his fault. “So,” he said, ignoring Snape’s comment. “What am I going to do now?”

"About what?" Snape asked, eyebrows rising.

"About whoever tried to kill me, sir. I can't count on the Bloody Baron to assist me every time I'm alone and someone ambushes me." Even the possibility made him shudder.

"You," Snape said, pointing a long, narrow finger directly at Harry's face, and he had to force himself not to take a step back, "will do nothing but go to bed at a reasonable hour, attend your classes, and do your homework as befits a child in this school. I will find the culprit with none of your damnable heroics, thank you very much."

"Right," Harry said, blanking his expression and making sure his voice held no trace of the deep annoyance he felt. "That sounds very reasonable."

"You are extraordinarily impertinent."

"Yes, sir."

The Bloody Baron laughed, and Harry turned to him at the same time as Professor Snape. "Ah, youth," he said, still chuckling. "Severus Snape, you would do well to remember what I said in our earlier conversation, before you make decisions based on your emotions."

"I do no such thing!"

"No? You would protect the boy by keeping him ignorant? Is that your well thought plan?"

"I do not need to justify my actions to you!"

"Of course not," the Bloody Baron said quietly. "But you might consider the very real question of how exactly the boy will protect himself when he is alone, if he has no idea who is after him."

Snape looked like he was going to argue some more, but Harry was tired of being talked about like he wasn't in the room. "The boy wonders if there's any way to un, er, Oblivate me, so I could

remember who attacked me. I mean, if I saw them, at the same time you did . . .”

Looking startled, briefly – probably due to being interrupted by an ‘impertinent brat’ – before his expression returned to the blank mask he wore most, when not sneering, Snape eyed Harry for a moment before saying, “You did it with his own wand?”

The Bloody Baron nodded.

“Then I should be possible to undo the spell using the same wand.” He sighed. “The Confundus . . . we’ll have to see. It’s possible I can see your memories, Potter, once they’re returned, even if you can not access them readily yourself. That is, if you permit it.” His lips had twisted, as if sucking on a lemon, and Harry was sure he rarely – if ever – asked for permission from anyone before he did anything.

That he did so now worried Harry just a little. Still, he nodded slowly. Now they were getting somewhere. Where, he had no idea. But he wanted those memories back. Needed them. And, short of killing someone, he’d do just about anything to get them back. “All right. What do I have to do?”

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for your support! Like, OMG! We’re darn close to 1000 reviews here! So close I can almost taste it; and it tastes like . . . chicken? Weird.

Next chapter out by early next week.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 16

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

That he did so now worried Harry just a little. Still, he nodded slowly. Now they were getting somewhere. Where, he had no idea. But he wanted those memories back. Needed them. And, short of killing someone, he'd do just about anything to get them back. "All right. What do I have to do?"

Severus almost smiled. The Boy Who Discombobulated Ghosts certainly didn't lack for gumption. He wondered, again, why Potter hadn't been sorted into Gryffindor . . . although his essay proved in several ways that he certainly fit in very well in Slytherin. Severus had not been telling the Baron the truth, completely, when he said the boy had no sense of self-preservation. He did, as shown in how he prioritized the requirements of others so as to make his own life livable. He used a rather sophisticated system, too, though Severus would never admit it.

This week, he decided, he was going to be paying that visit to the Dursleys, and woe to them if he could not make them see reason in their dealings with the child given to their care.

But Potter was waiting -- as was the Bloody Baron -- and Severus put out his hand. "Give me your wand."

Potter hesitated, then reached into a pocket and pulled out eleven inches of holly. Severus wrapped his potion stained fingers around it, but Potter did not let go until Severus lifted an eyebrow in his general direction. The boy dropped his end of the wand with a scowl.

"Clean this up, then come and sit there," Severus said and pointed at the nearest chair. He prepared his mind for the spellwork while the boy cleared up the rest of the unsliced murtlap, covered the vat and cleaned his knives and the table expertly before returning to sit down. "Now. Look me in the eyes, Potter, and continue to do so. I am going to search for your memories of that night. First, I'll attempt to reverse the Obliviate, and if that doesn't do it, I'll use Legilimency to go into your mind and look for the memories and perhaps draw them forward. Do you understand?"

"No." The boy gave him a rueful smile. "But it's kind of above my level, so I'm not likely to, am I?"

"Not really," Severus admitted, once more impressed with Potter's readiness to proceed anyway.

"I'm ready," he said, bracing his arms on the table.

Severus very much doubted that was really the case, but he would take what he could get. "Try and relax, but keep your eyes open as much as possible, if you would. This may . . . feel a bit strange." The boy nodded, and held his gaze, and Severus had no further reason to delay. "Restutio Facultas."

Piecing back together a memory after it had been Obliviated was never easy, and was not always possible. Using the original wand made success far likelier. A willing subject, even more so. All the same, Severus had always likened the process to simultaneously preparing a hundred minutely different potions, each with a series of overlapping instructions. He had to grab each ingredient by touch, add it at the right time to the right potion, and move on to the next cauldron fast enough to keep them all going. There was no room for error.

Likewise, inside the boy's mind, he had to grab this image, that gesture, this reflection of light, and that fraction of sound, all with a similar magical signature to them which denoted their attachment to a particular specific Obliviated memory, and then assemble them in order, at the right time, so the memory flowed into a cohesive whole.

Error could mean anything from erasing more memories, to causing the mind to be stuck in the one memory being restored, running on a loop through it, forever, to a virtual lobotomization of the subject's mind.

It was exhausting and laborious work, and yet, when it worked, the end result was very satisfying. Throughout, the temptation was there to explore others of Potter's memories while he had been given unfettered access, but he did not actually have the time or energy for such liberty, and kept his focus on repairing the Baron's handiwork.

Breathing heavy and with a headache a mile long when he withdrew at last from the boy's mind and dropped the spell, Severus loosened his grip on the holly wand. His hands had grown cramped around it; his nails a pale blue.

And Potter . . . Potter was slumped back in the chair, slack jawed and looking for all the world like Severus had rendered him completely mindless. A thread of drool ran from the corner of his mouth.

Damn!

Severus rushed toward him, and lifted one of his bruised looking eyelids, then the other, finding his pupils dilated, but still responsive. He reached for a pulse and said, "Potter. Harry! Can you hear me?" as the boy's throat swallowed reflexively against his fingers. Say something, damn you.

The muttered, "Hurts," was likely the best word he'd ever heard.

"I imagine so," Severus murmured. "It will get better." Though he had tried to be gentle, due to Potter's age if nothing else, the procedure, in his own experience of being on the other end, was not unlike like having very sharp razors applied to one's brain, slicing bits off here and there before they were glued back together.

"Accio Solamen Venenum," he said and held out the hand that had been lifting eyelids and pulse checking. He caught the pain relief potion easily, uncorked it with his thumb and index finger and held it to Potter's lips. "Drink this."

"Wazzit?" he asked, turning his head away.

"A potion for the pain, Mr. Potter. I assure you, I do not have poisoning you on today's itinerary."

"Like the frogs," the boy said, and Severus frowned. Had he messed up after all?

"No, like a pain potion," he said. "Now drink it, and then we'll have a chat," unless I have inadvertently thrown a Flagrante Curse into the middle of your ability to reason and form sentences.

Potter's face screwed up, but he let the potion bottle come to his lips this time, and even drank it all down. Severus waited a few minutes, for it to take affect. At one point, feeling a set of judgmental eyes surveying him, he glared at the Bloody Baron. If not for his bloody Obliviate, this would have been far simpler. The Baron merely leant -- rather casually, and in obvious disregard for laws of ectoplasmic beings -- against the wall nearest the door, his face as blank as Severus on his best days. His eyes, though . . . haunted didn't begin to describe it.

Finally, the boy in the chair straightened up, though he rubbed his hand across his scar a few times as if it pained him, and his eyes were squinting more than usual behind his ill fitting glasses.

"Better?"

"Yessir," Potter said, slurring the words a little, still.

"Do you remember your name?"

"Bo . . . Harry Potter, sir."

What had he been about to say? "And do you remember where you are?"

Potter scrubbed his eyes with his fingers and nodded. "Classroom. Dungeons."

"That's right. Now, do you remember what we were just doing, you, the Bloody Baron and I?"

"Trying . . ." Potter sounded rather tired. "To get memories."

"Yes. And do you have them now?"

"I . . ." Lines formed in Potter's forehead, and he rubbed at his scar again.

"Does your scar hurt?"

A nod. "Like in my nightmare."

"The one I found you awakened from?"

"Yessir."

Severus' frown deepened. Surely such dreams couldn't be connected to the curse scar. Could they? He glanced at the Baron, and was surprised to see him closer now, floating almost alongside the Brat. Keeping his eyes on the ghost, he said, "What do you remember about the nightmare?"

"Green . . . green light. And . . . and the snake-face man. . . . Laughing."

Severus' gaze snapped to the boy's face, a dawning sense of horror taking his breath away. Surely Potter had been too young to have remembered that. Did he even know what the dream meant? And yet, if his scar hurt afterwards, and the two were connected . . .

The boy was shivering, and Severus took out his own wand and cast a simple warming charm on the immediate area, though he knew at least part of Potter's shivering was not due to cold. "Do you remember the fight in the dungeons now?" he asked quietly.

With a quick jerk of his head, Potter said, "Yes, sir," through gritted teeth.

Leaning forward, the Bloody Baron reached toward Harry's face with one silvery hand. "Tell me, child, who attacked us?"

Potter pulled back from the near contact, his eyes wide and focussed completely for the first time since Severus left his mind. He wrapped his arms around his stomach, a classic attempt at self-protection. "I . . . I can't tell, r-really. It was d-d-dark, where he was. But not just like no torches. Real dark."

"Magically?" Severus wondered aloud. "Obscuro or Ignotos?"

"Perhaps." The Bloody Baron shrugged eloquently. He moved closer, still, to the boy. "Did you hear his voice?"

"H-he was like a snake," Potter said, the trembling in his limbs more pronounced. "All hissing and slithery sounding."

Gaping, Severus sat back in his chair. Had it been Parseltongue? Had the Dark Lord actually, finally returned? His insides turned to ice at the very idea. Slowly, showing none of the dread or revulsion he felt, he said, "He sounded like a snake. . . . Could you understand what he was saying?"

Potter nodded. "It was just with all extra esses and stuff."

Not Parseltongue then, for he could not imagine the boy was a Parselmouth. Maybe an imitator? Someone who wanted Potter to think he was the Dark Lord? That possibility was nearly as bad, for that meant a Death Eater had gotten past the wards on the school, since Severus hoped that he was the only actual Death Eater on staff.

As the boy shivered some more, Severus called up a House-elf and ordered the creature to bring them cocoa and something for the boy to nibble on. Once it had arrived, and Potter had a cup of the hot drink in his hands, helping to warm him, Severus said, "Tell me what you do remember."

And so he did. Potter's story matched evenly with what the Baron said, and he had a good recall of what spells had been used against

him, and what he and the ghost had cast together, but he didn't have any more solid clues about the attacker's identity than the Baron had. His voice became stronger and more sure as he spoke, and the shaking stopped after only a couple minutes. "I'm not sure if I could do the spells again so well, but I think I have the basic wand movement, even for the last couple," he admitted as he finished up.

"That will work to your advantage if you are so accosted again," Severus said. He still had a number of questions, but it was late. "I would still like to view the memory, Mr. Potter," he said as the boy took the last sip from his third cup of cocoa. "I believe it will help me piece together who your attacker was. I may recognize the voice." Though, by Merlin, he hoped not.

"Um, okay." Potter set the mug down on the table and took a long breath, his gaze wary but resigned as he looked into Severus' eyes.

"Not tonight," Severus said, suppressing a grimace at Potter's willingness to undergo another procedure so soon. "Tomorrow during your detention will be soon enough. It's after curfew already, and you're tired, as am I. I will walk you back to your room."

The relief that passed over Potter's face would have been hard for anyone to miss, but he nodded and rose. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"It . . ." Severus paused, trying to figure out why exactly he though he needed to reassure the boy, but then gave the self-reflection up as a bad job and said, "My viewing the memory will not be as painful as tonight's search was. We should not have to do that again."

"Oh, good."

With one of his less ferocious sneers, Severus rose from the chair he had taken across from the boy, and nodded at the Bloody Baron on the way out of the classroom. The Baron inclined his head, and there was a promise in that dark gaze; the ghost would protect his Slytherin child as much as possible until they discovered the assassin.

Just outside the portrait to the Snake Pit, Severus stopped the boy with a hand on his arm. "Potter . . . don't mention to anyone the content of those memories . . . or the Bloody Baron's apparent involvement in the attack."

Potter's lips turned up slightly. "I know, sir. I'm not as stupid as I look, remember?"

Severus snorted lightly and shook his head. "Cheeky brat. Go to bed, no side trips. And try not to get killed tomorrow at Quidditch tryouts."

Potter actually smiled at him. "Yes, sir. Good night."

The portrait had closed behind the boy before Severus answered him. "Good night, Harry."

TBC . . .

A/N: Sweet! We hit 1000 reviews and then some. Thank you, everyone, for your support! Next chapter out by Thursday.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 17

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Severus snorted lightly and shook his head. "Cheeky brat. Go to bed, no side trips. And try not to get killed tomorrow at Quidditch tryouts."

Potter actually smiled at him. "Yes, sir. Good night."

The portrait had closed behind the boy before Severus answered him. "Good night, Harry."

Though he was exhausted, Harry had a difficult time falling asleep that night. He kept going over the returned memories of the attack, as well as reliving the feel of having the Bloody Baron take up residence in his body. To be honest, he was wildly unhappy with that whole episode, even if it had saved his life; he hated not having control, and the Baron had taken every bit from him, and then erased his memories afterwards. It was maddening, and not fair besides.

When he did finally sleep, his dreams were disjointed and full of strange sounds and colors, and left him with a vaguely hung over feeling the next morning, which he had still not shaken by the time the others rose.

It didn't help that Zabini started in on him right away. Harry was still gathering his toiletries to take to the shower room when his dorm mate said, "If you're never going to show up for our study group, Potter, you might as well not be in it. We'd rather have someone else anyway."

Stung, though he tried not to show it, Harry said, "Maybe you should petition our Head of House, then. You could ask him to let me out of detention so I can help you with your studies."

"I wouldn't need your help, even if the class was Retarded Muggles Through the Ages," Zabini snarled. "You're hopeless."

"Not useless, though."

"What the hell are you saying, half-blood?"

Harry smirked, knowing nothing set the dark haired boy's teeth on edge as much as the idea someone was mocking him. "Nothing more than you think. And by the way, not that it matters, but both my parents had magic, so if anything, I'm three-quarters blood. I realize that's higher math and all—"

"You little sh—"

"Shut it, Zabini," Teddy growled at him. He had his wand out, but it wasn't aimed at anyone, just held casually as you please on one hand, as he lounged against the wall like he hadn't a care in the world. "We're all getting a bit tired of your mouth."

"You can say that again," Draco said. The blond's eyes were half lidded, but he stared down Zabini all the same.

Teddy sneered and said, "We're getting a bit tired of your mouth."

"Why are you sticking up for this filth, huh? Daddy tell you to suck up to him?" Zabini glared at Draco, as if the latter had betrayed him in some way.

Draco shrugged, all casualness. "Slytherins have to stay on top, and I heard he's a great Seeker. Guess we'll see today."

Watching him, Harry wondered why he was saying that, if he was supposed to be angry about Harry getting on the team, like Teddy had told him while he was in the infirmary. But maybe Draco didn't like him for some other reason. Or maybe . . . Harry sighed. His head

still hurt and he was tired of thinking about this. "Look, Zabini, I don't want to fight with you. We've only been here a week; we've got seven years to get through. I, for one, would rather get along with you than not."

"Try not, then." Zabini turned and strode from their dorm.

Harry frowned, but shook his head. It was just a stupid rivalry, and he didn't have the time or energy for it. It wasn't as though Zabini was the one who'd attacked him, unless he was a far better dueler with his wand than he was with his mouth. Turning to the others, he said, "Thanks for the assist, but I don't want you to get on his bad side, either."

Teddy laughed. "He doesn't have a good side. He hates pretty much everything."

"Well that's reassuring," Harry said

Draco laughed, too, and the three of them left Crabbe and Goyle still snoring as they made their way to the shower room. Zabini was already in a stall, and billows of steam poured out of it. The other boys stripped down, and Harry was glad Madam Pomfrey had taken care of the bruising from the attack, so he didn't have to suffer anyone's stares.

Draco took the stall next to his, and after both of them had water turned on, said, "So, I heard you have to help with tryouts today."

"Yeah, Marcus . . . er, Prefect Flint wanted me there to help challenge anyone trying out for Chaser or Beater." He smiled thinly, suddenly understanding where Draco's new buddy-buddy behavior was coming from. "You going to try for it?"

"Sure. I mean, my father says I could go either as Seeker or Chaser, so I figured why not? Wouldn't it be great if there were two first years on the team?"

"Uh huh." Did Malfoy think he was being subtle? Harry sighed and finished up in the shower, then dressed quickly and settled in the

Common Room with his neglected homework. He'd woken early and gotten most of his Transfiguration essay done, but he was still behind in History of Magic. With one thing and another, he felt like he was never going to catch up.

Teddy joined him a little later, with his Potions book, and they read together silently until it was nearly time to march up to breakfast. The Common Room was pretty full by that time, and the noise level had reached the point where it was all but impossible to read.

As he went by to get everyone readied in line, Marcus Flint said, "All right there, Potter?"

Harry glanced up at him and smiled at the older boy's scowl. "Yeah, Prefect Flint. I'm good."

"It's Captain Flint to you, Potter." He squinted at Teddy. "But just you, mind."

Harry held in a chuckle. "Yeah, okay. Thanks."

"All right!" Flint called out. "Let's line up and get out of here!"

Breakfast was relatively quiet – at the Slytherin table at least. Harry nibbled on some toast, not feeling particularly hungry, and watched warily as the Bloody Baron coasted nearby, although the ghost did not stop to talk.

"Have you seen him lately?" Teddy asked in a low voice.

"Hm?"

"The Baron. He's showed up again and started putting Peeves in his place. Have you asked him if he knows about who attacked you?"

"Yeah . . ." Harry paused, thinking quickly. He wasn't supposed to tell anyone about what happened. But Teddy – and Millie – both already knew quite a bit about it. "But he didn't know much more than me, really," he said at last, which was the truth. Sort of. "Professor Snape said to keep my eye out for who might be trying to get me."

“Duh.”

Harry snickered. But thinking of the attack made him remember something else. “Hey, Teddy, you didn’t send me chocolate frogs, did you? When I was laid up?”

“No.” Teddy frowned at him. “I told you, I don’t give candy to whiners.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just that someone left me another box of ‘em, and didn’t leave a note, so . . .”

“You’re thinking they might be tampered with?”

“I was thinking maybe.”

“Did you bring them back to the dorm?”

Harry nodded. “But I haven’t touched them otherwise.”

“Okay, that’s good. We can do some diagnostic spells on them. Check for curses and such. I have a couple things we can try, but I’ll have to double check in the library. Now, you have Quidditch tryouts this afternoon, so if we want to get this done soon . . .”

“Free period?”

“Mm-hm. Meet me in the library and you can help look stuff up.”

Harry nodded again, but inside he was bemoaning the loss of yet more study time.

Looking up diagnostic spells in the library was almost as fun as it sounded. Teddy seemed to be really good at doing research, though, and he pulled book after book off shelves, making a neat pile on the table they were using. Harry had retrieved the box of Frogs from their dorm room, and they started with small spells that Teddy already knew, like Revelio and Finite Incantatem, and worked up to more specific kinds of diagnostics, like looking for poisons (Ostendo Virum) and particular curses (Quiest Vomica).

But none of them revealed anything untoward about the Chocolate Frogs.

"Face it, Harry," Teddy said as they returned the books to their shelves over an hour later, "someone gave you a perfectly normal box of chocolate. Probably a secret admirer or something."

"Yeah." Harry laughed. "Sure." He tucked the box into his book bag and they headed for Herbology. He was just as glad the sweets weren't poisoned or anything, but who had given the box to him? He went over the possibilities in his head for a while, and then gave it up. If it was a secret admirer, he hoped they'd give him more clues to their identity. Or maybe there was a spell to find that out, too. He said the last aloud, and Teddy nodded, considering. Harry added, "You know a lot of spells already. Did your parents teach you?"

Teddy gave him a sidelong look. "My father, mostly."

Harry nodded, realizing there was something Teddy wasn't telling him, but they were almost to the greenhouses, and the class was interesting enough to keep his mind occupied with that for a while.

After lunch and History of Magic, Harry headed out to the changing rooms on the Quidditch pitch. Marcus wanted all the current players to be in uniform for the tryouts. Harry was nervous, and his hands were trembling as he pulled on his bright green and silver robes, which, supposedly, Snape had needed to have altered to fit him as he was smaller than their previous Seeker by a good margin. Once he'd got his gloves on, he went out to the pitch with the others, taking one of the school brooms as he wasn't allowed to have his own as a first year, and waited for Flint to give them directions.

There were more than twenty Slytherins waiting to try out for the team, including Draco and two other first years. They all looked hungry for the opportunity to be on the team. Draco looked positively starving.

"All right, you lot," Flint told the contenders, "mount up and give me a half dozen sweeps by the stands. If you can stay on your broom that long, you'll get to take the next test."

There were a few chuckles as the group got on their brooms over the next few seconds and rose into the air. They started almost as one, but thinned out quickly, as the faster and more confident fliers took the lead in rounding the pitch.

Meanwhile, Flint turned to the current team. “Bletchley, I want you up as Keeper, obviously. Don’t let any of the new snots get anything by you, or we’ll have words, got it?”

“Yeah.” Flint shot him a cold look, and Bletchley added, “Captain,” before Flint had to remind him.

“Pucey, you’ll be working as a Beater today, with Bole and Higgs—”

“Three Beaters! What’re—”

“You’ll do as I say, Pucey, without any lip, or you’ll step off the field right now. We’ve got to take these buggers out hard and fast. Three Beaters’ll separate the players from the fakers right enough.”

Pucey grimaced, but said no more, and Harry stood perfectly still so it wouldn’t seem as he was giving any lip either.

“Potter, all I want you to do is keep an eye out for the snitch. Think you can handle it?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Flint gave him a steely smile. “Let’s get to it, gentlemen.”

The next two hours were bloody and sweaty and violently nasty for those who were trying out, at least from what Harry could tell from his own angle, far above them. He sought out the snitch and caught it over a dozen times before Flint had him running interference with the hopefuls, too, just sweeping through their ranks and catching them off guard when he could. Several players had to leave the field to go to the infirmary when they were smashed by bludgers, crashed into other players, or dove too steeply to pull up in time to keep from hitting ground. Of the fifteen who survived that round, Flint had them

go against Bletchley while being hounded by all three Beaters as well as Harry. Anyone who didn't score at least half the time was automatically rejected.

Finally, they were down to just three.

Marcus looked them over. His expression just as fierce as it had been all afternoon. "Right. Malfoy and Wilkes, you'll be on reserve. I expect you to be at every practice, and you'll need to learn Chaser and Beater positions equally, so you can fill in if there's an injury. Rufford, you're the new Chaser. All of you get fitted for uniforms and be at practice on Thursday at 7. Got it?"

"Got it, Captain," Draco said, pink cheeked and pleased, and the other two, both fourth years, agreed.

"Hit the showers you lot," Flint told them, and stalked off.

Draco grinned at Harry as they made their way to the changing rooms, bumping his shoulder in comradely fashion as he went by. "I knew I'd make the team!"

Harry grinned back, more glad than he could say that another first year was going to be playing with him. He didn't enjoy the pressure of being the "youngest Seeker in a hundred years," and Draco seemed to like the attention more anyway. He really soaked it up at dinner.

As a congratulations, Harry gave him a couple of Chocolate Frogs from the box he'd been toting around all afternoon. Recognizing the box, no doubt, Teddy lifted his eyebrows at him in silent reproach. But even though they both watched Draco closely, nothing bad happened when he ate the sweet, so Harry figured the rest of them really were okay. And no one at the table looked at the box with anything more than slight curiosity, if that, so Harry figured it wasn't any of the Slytherins who had given it to him. Weird.

After dinner, Harry made his way back to Snape's office for detention. His steps dragged a bit, and if he was honest, he would say he was scared. The process of un-Obliviating him, last night, had hurt an awful lot, like someone was slicing up his brain piece by piece, like a

boiled ham, and though it was done with sharp, precise cuts, there were still bits hanging off like raw, exposed nerves.

The thought of doing that again made him sort of nauseous, actually, and he paused for several long moments before knocking on the office door. Snape had said this, whatever it was they were doing tonight, would not hurt as much. He certainly didn't imagine anything could hurt any more.

At the professor's call of, "Enter," he opened the door and sidled into the room. He noted that the Bloody Baron was already there, hovering near Snape's desk. Unlike other times Harry had come in here, Snape was not marking any papers, and he looked up at once instead of making Harry wait.

Thank god.

Snape pulled out his wand, but before Harry could duck out of the way or even think of flinching, he had cast a few spells on the door. Silencing and privacy wards, he imagined . . . the silencing one, particularly, was familiar, and he realized his attacker had used it on the hallway they'd fought in, as one of his first spells.

"Sit down," Snape said and pointed at the chair in front of his desk. Harry complied, and Snape watched him for a few minutes. Harry didn't meet his gaze, not wanting to let the man into his head again, not wanting to feel that excruciating pain like before. "Do not be afraid. This won't hurt; I told you."

"Yessir," Harry said in a breathless voice. His hands were caught in the sleeves of his robes, and he clenched the material tightly to keep them still. "But then, you said the other thing might just feel a bit strange."

A pause, then, "I did. I was . . . unaware of how much discomfort you would feel."

Harry's nose wrinkled. "So you mean I'm just a weakling?"

“Not at all. I believe I have a different metric for determining levels of pain than most.”

“What?”

“He means,” the Bloody Baron put in, “that he has had too much exposure to pain to understand what normal feels like anymore. And he didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Snape glared at the ghost. “I would ask you to keep your nose out of my affairs, if I thought it would do any good.”

“It wouldn’t,” the Baron agreed affably. “Not at this time. The boy is what matters.”

Snape grunted what could be an acceptance of the ghost’s words, or maybe he’d only been kicked in the chest. Either way, he said, “But as I informed you previously, Mr. Potter, what we are to do tonight will not feel like that. Not if you don’t fight me.”

Harry’s insides felt cold. “Why . . . why would I fight you, sir?”

With a sneer, Snape said, “Because having another mind inside your own is disconcerting, at the least. In truth, I expect you to resist, though not unduly.” He paused, and Harry sneaked a glance at him, to find the professor studying him with those dark, fathomless eyes. “I will be looking at your memory of the attack, and then I will remove it from my own mind and store it in a pensieve, so I may review it with the Headmaster.”

“A pen-what?”

“Pensieve. A magical device used to store memories for later reflection.”

“Well, why don’t I put my memory directly into that then? Instead of having you take it out of my mind first?”

“Because the pensieve belongs to the Headmaster, and he has not given me its loan.”

“Oh.”

“Indeed.” Snape paused again, then raised his wand and aimed it at Harry. “Let us begin. Keep your eyes open, as you did last night, and do try not to fight me, if you would. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir. I’ll try not to fight,” Harry promised.

“Good. Legilimens.”

Images flew by, first of Quidditch tryouts, and then Teddy and him in the library with the box of candy, and then, disconcertingly, a memory of being up a tree with Ripper far below and snarling, as Aunt Marge cheered the dog on and Dudley laughed, practically rolling on the ground.

That wasn’t the right memory! Snape had no right to see that!

Harry pushed against the presence in his mind, and it receded a little, but the image was replaced a moment later with one of his cupboard, locked from the outside – he could tell from the angle of the door; it always hung crooked when locked, as Uncle Vernon had made a mess of installing the bolt – and himself curled up on his cot and reading a purloined comic that Dudley had torn in half and thrown away before Harry rescued it, and then the door shook, and Harry stuffed the pieces of the comic under his cot before Uncle Vernon’s purpling face appeared in the frame of the small door, spittle flying from his mouth while he yelled, even before he caught sight of the corner of the thin book—

NO! Not that one! Harry pushed that memory away, too. What did Snape think he was doing?

Obviously he was going to have to show him the right memory, or Snape would keep ransacking his mind. So Harry called up the attack in the corridor, recalling everything he could in infinite detail, and shoved that right at the presence in his mind, so clear it couldn’t be

missed. Then, for good measure, he shoved the professor right out of his mind, too; his private thoughts were private!

The next moment, he opened his eyes, to find he'd fallen off the chair and was on his hands and knees, panting for breath. Sweat covered his skin and his robes clung damply to him. His head pounded, and he wanted more than anything else to bite Snape's throat out with his teeth. The Professor stood over him, his dark eyes glittering with some unnamed emotion, and for a second, Harry thought it might be fear.

But then Snape's face went blank, as did his eyes. Though he held out a hand for Harry to take, Harry disdained it, getting to his feet on his own. His stomach lurched, but he kept his balance through sheer force of will.

Snape crossed his arms over his chest. "Well, well, Potter. It seems you are full of surprises."

"You. Stay. Out. Of my. Head!"

With a gesture at the chair Harry had fallen out of, Snape merely said, "Sit down. You and I have much to discuss."

"I'm not talking to you!" Harry growled. "You had no right—"

"Stop with the melodrama, Potter. I had every right to seek answers to your current dilemma. And you gave me explicit permission to do so."

"What about those other things, huh? You didn't have the right to see those!"

Snape pursed his lips. "I was also seeking information about your situation at home. As your Head of House—"

"Bollocks! You didn't ask to see that!"

The Potions Master drew himself up and glowered down with such ferocity that Harry was hard pressed not to flinch away when he spat,

“No. I did not. But I will brook no more of your disrespect. Now sit down!”

Harry sat.

“Now . . . you will tell me when exactly you discovered you could speak to snakes.”

TBC . . .

A/N:

The next chapter will be an unveiling of many mysteries, and we'll have the long awaited trip to see the Dursleys. Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews. I should have the next chapter out by the weekend.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 18

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously on Better Be Slytherin!:

The Potions Master drew himself up and glowered down with such ferocity that Harry was hard pressed not to flinch away when he spat, "No. I did not. But I will brook no more of your disrespect. Now sit down!"

Harry sat.

"Now . . . you will tell me when exactly you discovered you could speak to snakes."

Trying to rein in his temper, Severus waited for the Brat to speak. His rage had a tendency to flare when something truly frightened him, though he would not admit to actually being frightened by the Brat. No, of course not. But it was rather . . . disconcerting to find that not only had the Boy Who Had Too Many Surprises Lurking Beneath His Scrawny, Tousled Exterior noticed what memories Severus was riffling through, but had then been able to expel him – a practiced and talented Legilimens – from his mind! Cheeky Brat! Severus should have been able to access those memories with no one the wiser, especially not the boy. He could have done it in his sleep! That he hadn't gotten away with it was almost more troubling than the memories themselves.

But it was worse than that. If the Brat had a natural talent at blocking his mind and shifting his memories around like he had done – as if he were playing Severus for the fool! – that was one thing. However, coupled with the Parseltongue Severus had heard spoken in the

memory, which the Brat said only sounded like sibilant English to him, it was something else entirely. If he was somehow accessing two uncommon powers of the Dark Lord's . . . Well. It didn't bear thinking about. Not at this very moment, at least. Perhaps later. When he could get good and stinking drunk.

And the very worst of all . . . Severus had recognized the commanding voice that spoke Parseltongue in the boy's memory. Shivers, which he hoped were well masked as quivering rage, went up and down his spine. He was not ready for this!

Right now, though, he had a chairful of angry Savior of the Wizarding World, whose glare matched Severus' favorite one, almost perfectly. So he schooled his face to an expectant expression and lifted his eyebrows, to show the Brat that he was waiting. Patiently.

"I didn't know I was, sir," the boy grated out. "I told you, it just sounded like English, but like the person had a mouthful of sand or something."

"Have you spoken to snakes before?"

Potter considered, and Severus could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he decided whether or not to answer honestly. "Once. At the zoo."

Severus sneered. Horrible Muggle invention, the zoo, where brainless idiots threw food at monkeys, only to have it thrown back. Often with interest. "Well, Potter? What happened?"

"I was at the zoo. I talked to a snake. Then the glass disappeared and the snake got out."

With a frown Severus wondered, Accidental magic, too? He studied the boy in front of him. He was hiding something. "What else?"

Potter set his jaw. His eyes were twin emerald fires, challenging him, daring Severus to descend upon him like a wrathful god. "Nothing that concerns you."

Something personal then, and given his recent forays into the boy's mind, something to do with his relatives. Their reaction to the magic, perhaps? Yesterday, Potter had told him, in visible terror at the mere possibility of a home visit, that his relatives hated magic and wizards as well. Severus' eyes narrowed. "What did they do to you?"

"None of your business! I don't . . . I don't know what you were trying to prove, sneaking into my memories like that, but you can't just do that."

"Potter—" he started tightly, only to be interrupted.

"Severus Snape," the Bloody Baron said in a low, chilling voice. The ghost was not even looking at Severus, but at the Brat Who Lived to Torment Him, with an expression of almost awe. "I believe you have badgered this boy enough for one night. Your enthusiasm for the task has outweighed its usefulness."

"I believe you are sticking your nose in too far, Baron," Severus told him. "We still need to know what was said in Parseltongue. And since the boy is the perhaps the only one alive who knows it—"

"What do you mean Parseltongue?" Potter interrupted. "What's that?"

Severus was very unhappy about being interrupted. Twice! Thus his answer was little more than a snarl, "The power to talk to snakes, boy! What do you think we've been going on about?"

"How am I supposed to know? I never heard of this Parsel-thingy."

"Parseltongue," Severus said very slowly, as if speaking to a dimwitted dog. "It is considered a power directly linked to the line of Salazar Slytherin. There are—"

"The Salazar Slytherin?"

"Enough! No more interruptions! Sit still and be quiet and I will tell you what I can. Understood?"

Potter fell back in his chair, eyes wide and not quite so angry. “Yes, sir.”

“Very well.” With some effort, Severus reined in his temper again. “In the last thousand years, there have been very few known Parselmouths—” he held up a hand to shield himself from the inevitable interruption – “which is to say, those who can speak Parseltongue. Amongst those was the Dark Lord, whom you vanquished as a mere infant.” He paused, letting that sink in.

“After he killed my parents,” the boy muttered, looking away.

“Yes,” Severus said heavily, his chest tight. God, Lily! “After that.”

“And so you think he’s back then. That he’s the one who attacked me.”

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose. “I do not know. I believed it was inevitable that he would return . . . but I do not know how he could have come within the walls of Hogwarts already.”

“Maybe someone let him in.”

“Of course they did, you silly child. The question is who.”

“Someone who knows a lot of hexes and counter curses, I’d think.”

Severus glared at the boy. “Why?”

“Because the one speaking Parseltongue wasn’t the same person who cast some of the other spells. Didn’t you . . .” Potter shrugged. “No, I guess you couldn’t tell. Their voices were totally different.”

Wasn’t the same person . . . ? Possession, perhaps? Was one of the staff members possessed? The height of irony, if so, a Baron-possessed Potter fighting off a Dark Lord-possessed somebody. For a little while, he thought about the memory, dissecting it piece by piece, and realized he did not recognize the voice of the non-Parselmouth. Damn it!

His gaze went back to the Bloody Baron, who was now regarding him, in turn. Severus drew a long breath. Though he was loathe to ask any boon from the ghost, he had to admit the Baron was simply swimming in knowledge of the kind Severus had little understanding of. "What do you think?"

The Baron favored him with a grim smile. "I think you should walk the child back to his dorm, as it is late, and he is tired. Then you should let me see his memory. I may pick up something you and the Headmaster miss."

"I am not done with him, as I said."

"And yet he is done with you." The Baron gestured to the boy, who was resting his head on his arms on a desk, eyes closed. The tension lines in his forehead were less pronounced in sleep, but still there. And his hands were clenched tight into fists, as if he were fighting some sort of inner battle. He did not appear to be dreaming, however.

Severus watched him for a few minutes, and felt suddenly very old, and very tired. This eleven-year-old boy had already faced down the Dark Lord twice – if it were him, indeed, who had attacked on Friday night – and lived to tell the tale. No one else in the world could boast as much. And yet . . . the boy did not boast. He was full of bravado, to be sure, but Severus saw through that tactic all too well – his own form of defense was often sarcastic vitriol, but he occasionally used the other when necessary. He knew it for the front it was, a mask the boy pulled over his face in order to stand up to threats, so he would not be seen as weak. Severus was sure of it, as sure as he was that the boy's relatives were abusing him.

And wasn't that a fine kettle of murtlap. The icon of the Wizarding World, starved, beaten and locked in a closet. It disgusted him, and enraged him, and he was going to have to make sure someone went with him before he visited the Dursleys, or he would not be responsible for his behavior.

"Very well," he said at last, and the Baron gave a grunt of acknowledgement. "But only because he is in no shape to make rational observations or remember things properly. Tomorrow I shall

require him to tell me more of this damnable ability he has to manipulate his mind away from mine.”

“Got your knickers in a twist, did he?”

Severus glared at the smiling ghost, then sighed and woke the boy – gently! He was turning into a bloody nursemaid. The boy roused with a jerk, and an instinctual hunch of his shoulders, and Severus gnashed his teeth. “Time for bed, Potter,” he said quietly.

Potter sat up all the way and wiped drool from his cheek with the edge of his robe. His posture was still tense as he said, “Sorry, sir.”

“Don’t be. I will walk you back to the dorms; it’s after curfew already.”

“Yes, sir.” The boy straightened his robes, and didn’t meet his eyes on the trip back.

At the portrait, he said, “Tomorrow, Potter. Seven o’clock sharp.”

Potter sighed, but nodded with a, “Yes, sir. Good night.”

Once more, Severus waited till the portrait door was closed before he responded. “Sleep well, Harry.”

The next day, Severus made time to meet with Potter’s relatives, at least in part because otherwise he would have to wait until the weekend, and he didn’t want to wait that long. Unfortunately for them, no one was available to watch his . . . back. The Dursleys would just have to live – or not – with the consequences, if they antagonized him further.

Shortly after his last class, he walked down to Hogsmeade then Apparated to Privet Drive, in Little Whinging, where his reports had that Potter lived. The neighborhood was one of those with perfect lawns and perfectly matched window boxes and identical vehicles in every drive. The monotony gave him a headache. Number Four was the same boxy structure as all the others, this one painted off-yellow instead of off-blue or off-white or off-green; all the houses were one of

these colors or another. The vehicle in their drive was a four door silver something or other.

After a swish of wand over his clothes rendered his appearance to that of a staid Muggle businessman, he made his way up the narrow walk to the Dursley's front door and knocked. Twice.

There was a longish pause, in which he made himself practice deep breathing exercises – which would have been good for his temper if not for the fumes of those blasted Muggle factories and cars fouling the air – so as to not begin on the wrong foot with this lot. Finally, he heard a sound like a herd of wild hippogriffs thundering toward the door, and he moved quickly to the side so as to avoid being trampled.

Something flung open the door at that moment, and he stared into the soft, pudgy face of a giant slug . . . with arms. It had slicked back hair and a scowl and its skin was alarmingly pink and perspiring, as if coming to open the door had required all its strength and fortitude.

“What do you want then?” it asked, sounding human, except for the inexcusable rudeness, and Severus finally recognized it from his delving, as the cousin Potter had mentioned as being one of his primary tormentors.

“Are your parents at home?” he asked the Slug . . . Dudley, he recalled. There was only a thin trace in his voice of the disgust he felt for having to ask this creature anything. “I would like to meet with them.”

“Mum!” the Slug hollered without even turning around. The sound of his squawk filled the street behind Severus. “Someone at the door for you!”

Severus resisted the urge to stick fingers in his ears to stave off deafness, and was glad he had resisted when the Slug attempted to slam the door in his face without inviting him in. Using a foot, and a forearm, Severus kept the door from closing. When he opened it wide again, he saw that the Slug was gone. From the thundering sounds coming from what appeared to be a sitting room off to the side of the entryway, it had gone in there.

A long-necked horsey-faced woman, wiping her hands on a towel, emerged from the kitchen, which was straight down the hall past a set of stairs to the second level. Petunia. The years had not been kind to her. She scowled at him immediately. "What are you doing here?" Her voice was pitched low, and she glanced involuntarily at the sitting room. "We don't want your sort here."

"That is abundantly clear, Madam," Severus said. "Nevertheless, as I am the Head of House for your nephew, at his school, I have a certain—"

"Shhhh," she hissed with another glance at the sitting room, where Severus could hear a television blaring. "Don't say anything more about it. Just get out and leave us alone. If he's making a mess of things as usual, it's your problem now, not ours."

"I beg to differ. He will still return at the end of the spring term, and you will have his care each summer until September first."

Petunia pursed her lips and natural color bloomed on her heavily rouged cheeks. "What do you want then?"

Ah, the womb from whence the Slug's manners were born. "I have come to discuss Harry, as his Head of House. I visit the families of all my first year students." He paused, quirked an eyebrow. "Did you not receive the owls, requesting an appointment?"

"No," she lied, badly. "We're a normal family here, now that he's gone, and do not let owls deliver the post!"

Putting a damper on his simmering temper, Severus sneered. "Ah, yes, I heard about the debacle with regards to your nephew's Hogwarts letter. You should have just let him read it, and avoided all that unpleasantness."

"You," Petunia spat, "will not tell me what to do in my own house."

"I would not dream of it." He bared his teeth in a semblance of a smile. "Is your husband at home? I should not like to repeat myself."

Her eyes narrowed, even as she paled. "He's busy."

"As am I. And yet, I came all the way out here, just to speak with you."

"About the boy." The loathing in that one word set Severus' teeth on edge.

"Indeed. Please let him know I am here." It hurt his jaw to be polite with this creature, who he remembered not at all fondly from his youth, and who seemed intent on giving him insult. And yet, for Potter's sake, he made sure his tone was absolutely correct, so they could find no fault with their nephew because of him.

Her complexion worsened, turning a fine shade of paste, as if she actually feared to do as Severus requested. Did Dursley run his household with an iron fist? From the boy's memories, he was almost sure the man did. "You can say whatever you need to, to me. Vernon is not available."

But her protests fell down altogether, as a heavy tread from the sitting room announced the arrival of, not the Slug, but the Slug's father. Vernon Dursley was almost as wide as he was tall, which was taller than Severus himself, and his face was already heading toward the purple color Severus had viewed in Potter's memory. Looking at him, he could tell that this beast was quick to anger, and once riled, would require a Stupefy, at least, to get him to back down. Severus was looking forward to it. Almost.

He would have done so wholeheartedly, if he knew for certain that Potter would not need to return to this household. But since he had no idea, really, if that were going to be possible, he had to watch his step. . . . no matter how much he wanted not to. The boy would not be able to use magic in the summer, except if his actual life was in danger, and Severus did not want him to set up a situation in which the boy would be forced to choose safety over Ministry censure.

"Pet?" the man said, frowning. "What's all this then? Did I hear mention of that place?"

Oh, for the love of Merlin, could they not even stand the idea of saying Hogwarts, or magic or any of it? Severus moved one step forward and gave a small nod of his head. It appeared Petunia would not introduce him. "Good evening, Mr. Dursley. Severus Snape, Potions Master. I mentioned Hogwarts. The school your nephew, Harry Potter, attends." He was interested to see how long the two of them could go without using Potter's name.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish, I say," Dursley growled. A dark glint lit his piggish eyes. "Is he giving you trouble then? I knew he would. Boy's as nasty as they come."

Severus gritted his teeth. They were still standing in the entry way, and no one had even given a hint that they might treat him as a guest by offering him a seat or tea. Philistines. "He is not, in fact, giving us any trouble. As I was explaining to your darling wife a moment ago, I visit the homes of all my first year students, to see what their individual needs might be when they arrive in the Wizarding World."

"Don't you say that word in my house!" Dursley all but shouted. Quick to anger, indeed.

"Which one?" Severus asked innocently. "World?"

"You bloody well know which one! I'll not have it! We put up with that boy's freakish ways for ten years. Ten years! Taking food out of our Dudley's mouth, and clothes off his back, and this is the thanks we get? No respect at all, and in my own home! We're well rid of that freak, and you can just shove him on someone else for a change!"

Severus glanced at Petunia who was paler still, if possible. "I do believe, Mr. Dursley, that there was an agreement reached when the Potter boy was taken into your home ten years ago."

"We were hoodwinked! The boy's been nothing but trouble since the day he darkened our door. Nothing but a nuisance and a danger to my whole family! We finally got rid of Dudders' tail," Dursley jabbed a sausage of a finger into Severus' chest, "which was all that freak's

fault. And no one came to pay recompense, either, for our poor son's suffering! Freaks, drunkards, and bastards, the lot of you."

There was a limit to Severus' patience at the best of times, and this was not one of those times. He had spent years in abject servitude to one of the most feared and reviled of maniacs in the history of Wizardry, and he knew his way around the pompous and blustery. Half of the Death Eaters were just like this Vernon, so sure of themselves and their particular view of the world that they would pay no heed to a giant squid if it landed on their face. So ready to lay blame on others, and shout their way out of any situation which made them question the tenets they held so dear.

He loathed such creatures.

He loathed this man.

With his left hand, he grabbed the man's finger as it reared back to jab him again, and squeezed. Hard. Dursley tried to rescue his digit, but Severus had years of such near-constant muscle-toning activities as stirring and chopping on his side, as well as keeping himself fit through sparring when he could. He was willing to bet this man had not seen his own muscles in a decade. Bending the forefinger back, he snarled, "You will keep a civil tongue in your mouth, Dursley, or I will carve it out myself and feed it to worms."

Sweat broke out on Dursley's brow. His bushy mustache trembled. He wrenched at his hand, trying to get back his finger. A little more wriggling, and the man would break his own finger with no assistance from Severus.

Severus bent the offending finger a little more, until the man whined in pain. "Do I have your attention?" He glanced out of the corner of his eye to make sure Petunia was still where she'd stopped before. She was, and was gaping at the display with her mouth opened wider than any first year at their first Halloween Feast.

"Ungh," said Dursley, knees almost buckling.

“Good. Because I will not repeat myself again. Harry Potter is your nephew. I am his Professor. I will ask you several questions about him, and you will answer, completely and honestly, or we will have to repeat this particular lesson until you do. Am I clear?”

“Mmmph.”

“Excellent.” He glanced over the man’s shoulder. “I believe the sitting room will be much more comfortable for our conversation than the entryway. Don’t you agree?”

“Ugghn-huh.”

“Then pray, lead on.” Severus proceeded to let Dursley lead them into the sitting room by the simple expedient of shoving him backwards towards it, keeping a firm grip on the man’s meaty finger. Once inside the small room – dominated by a television, a large couch, two recliners, a fireplace and a Slug – Severus pushed Dursley onto the couch and sneered as he released the man’s digit. “Perhaps Petunia would be so kind as to bring tea?”

Petunia, hovering by the doorway, jumped at the sound of her name and looked more sour than ever, but she gave a curt nod and disappeared, towards the kitchen, one might hope.

Oddly, the Slug was curled up, wide eyed and petrified, on the other end of the couch from his father, and was clutching his bottom as if it might catch fire . . . oh, Dursley had said something about a tail. Severus suppressed a snicker and looked around the room, taking in the gaudy knickknacks and unmoving pictures of this horrific family, noting that there was not one of Lily or James or even Harry, who had supposedly lived here for ten years. Instead, the walls seemed almost entirely devoted to the Slug, with a few of his parents mixed in for variety. There was no sign at all, in fact, that the Potter boy lived here, or ever had.

“Now,” he said, settling into one of the recliners – though not reclined – once Petunia had returned, “Pray tell me about Mr. Potter’s primary schooling. In what subjects did he excel? Which ones were more troublesome?”

Dudley, apparently done with arse gripping, snorted an ugly laugh. "Freaky Potty? He's a dunce. Couldn't spell his own name right if you gave him twenty quid."

"That's right, Dudders," Dursley said, nodding. "The boy never could get grades like yours. Always making excuses for his homework not getting done or cutting classes. Stupid freak, just like his father. Always getting in trouble, too, with his freak displays and . . ."

Severus tuned the man out as he prattled on. This was getting him nowhere. He knew for a fact that the boy wasn't stupid, having seen first hand a well-reasoned essay that spoke to the contrary, and he knew all the rest of his usual questions would be met with the same lies and scorn. He could not imagine this was what Lily had in mind for her son.

There were only a couple things he could do at this point, to try and salvage whatever he could of this abysmal visit, and he was far better versed at one than the other. Besides, while torturing this lot held a certain vicious appeal, there was always the tedious clean up afterwards, and the chance Aurors might be called to the scene. Thus, while Dursley built up a good head of steam on a topic close to his heart – that of the utter worthlessness of his nephew – Severus surreptitiously slid his wand into his hand from the sleeve of his business suit coat, and cast a non-verbal Legilimens.

More than an hour later, sick and tired and ready to collapse, having Legilimized all three Muggles, Severus then Obliviated them, replacing the memories of his visit with a pleasant evening in front of the telly, but adding in a particularly nasty nightmare curse for spite. Then he Apparated to Hogsmeade and made the long, exhausting trek back to the castle. He considered cancelling his detention with the boy tonight, but they really needed the translation of the Parseltongue, as it might give a clue as to who had been with the Dark Lord during the attack.

Perhaps, though, he should just have the Baron talk to Potter while the boy prepared more potion ingredients. The ghost seemed far better able to deal with the child – or was more consistent with him, at

least – and Severus knew he was likely to be short and snappish this evening, even without Potter's temper thrown into the mix.

Yes, that would work. And it would have the added benefit of freeing Severus to visit the Headmaster and show him a few home truths.

TBC . . .

A/N:

I deliberately left the Legilimency of the Dursleys blank, so I can back fill later as needed. Also, this chapter was getting really long, and I wanted to put it up sooner rather than later. Hope you don't mind! I should have the next chapter out by Monday, most likely.

Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews! You're my apple pie, my three-legged race, and my fireworks at midnight. Love and hugs for all!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 19

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. Oh, well.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Perhaps, though, he should just have the Baron talk to Potter while the boy prepared more potion ingredients. The ghost seemed far better able to deal with the child – or was more consistent with him, at least – and Severus knew he was likely to be short and snappish this evening, even without Potter's temper thrown into the mix.

Wednesday morning, Harry woke with a headache, which he ignored to the best of his ability, until his scar started hurting as well, during Defense Against the Dark Arts class. He pressed a hand to his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain. It burned, like a hot needle jabbing into his brain, which it had not done before, except for rarely during or right after a bad nightmare. In those situations, the burning was gone almost immediately, but this time, the torment kept going on and on and on

"Harry," someone whispered, though the sound was like the crack of thunder in his ears. And then an elbow, in his side.

Harry opened one eye, just a slit, to find Teddy's face real close, his eyes making an obvious 'look over there' gesture, and Harry followed the direction of Teddy's look, to find Professor Quirrell standing almost over him, and glowering. Which wasn't at all like Professor Quirrell.

"Wh-wh-what is the m-m-meaning of this, P-p-potter?"

"Headache," Harry said shortly. "May I go to the Infirmary?"

The stuttering professor's eyes narrowed, but he gave a curt nod. Harry stood up to start gathering his books, but his knees buckled suddenly, and he had to grab the desk to keep from ending up on his arse.

"G-g-go with h-h-him, M-mister Nott."

Teddy, who was already gathering Harry's books together for him, collected his own, too, with a nod, and slung the bags over his shoulder. "You need help?" he asked Harry in a low voice.

"No." Harry knew he did, really, but he was not going to show weakness in front of his fellow Slytherins, not if he could at all help it. He'd felt worse before, certainly, just not in his scar, and although he probably had nothing like Snape's experience with becoming accustomed to excruciating pain, he had lived day to day with at least a small amount for most of his life. So he focused on putting one foot in front of the other, and not vomiting or keeling over as they made their way out of the classroom and down the corridor toward the Infirmary.

Oddly, they had gone no more than twenty feet from the Defense classroom before the headache eased, and the burning in Harry's scar vanished almost entirely. The sudden loss of that searing agony made him reel, gasping for breath.

"Harry?" Teddy called, his voice coming from far away. "Let me go get Madam Pom--"

"No," he rasped, bending over with his hands on his knees. "It's okay. The pain's almost gone."

Teddy's voice sounded strangled. "Were you skiving?"

Harry shook his head, finding out the hard way that the torture wasn't truly over. "No, it's weird. Like . . ." Like the only reason he had been in pain was because of his connection through the scar to Voldemort. Or a connection to his minion, someone who knew lots of curses and hexes. Like a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher would.

"Come on," he said, and grabbed at Teddy's hand. "I need to find . . ." He trailed off, not sure who he could tell. Professor Snape was the obvious choice, but Harry was still angry with him for invading his mind the night before. And the Bloody Baron . . . well, who knew what the ghost would be able to do about this information. He wondered if it was something he should tell the Headmaster about, but he didn't want to disturb Dumbledore with complaints about a headache.

Even as he decided on not telling anyone, Teddy pulled away. "No, you're not going anywhere except the Infirmary. You need to have a lie down. Your face is pasty, and in case you were wondering, Malfoy might be able to pull it off, but it's not a good look for you."

Leave it to Teddy to soften a lecture with a joke. "All right, all right, Mum. I'll get a headache potion."

"And I'll make sure you do. Come on."

Madam Pomfrey actually praised him for coming to the Infirmary when he was "under the weather," and Harry sped out of there as fast as he could, more embarrassed than he could say. Honestly!

Teddy just snickered softly, and made Harry carry their book bags down to the dungeons, as was only fair, now that he was feeling better. There, Millicent accosted Harry the second he got to the Slytherin common room, asking if he was okay, or if there was anything she could do to help. She'd taken good notes in Defense, she said, and would make a copy for Harry for their study group.

"Can't be there," Harry admitted. "I still have detention for two more days."

"Well, I'll still have the notes for you." She gave Teddy a wrinkle-nosed, considering look. "You can have a copy, too, I suppose. Though your own group should have some for you."

Teddy opened his mouth, likely to say something cutting about how he certainly wouldn't need any notes that Millie took, but Harry gave him a quick, sharp glance, and he just nodded instead. "Yeah, thanks. If they don't have the notes for me, I'd like a copy."

Millie's smile was amazingly bright. Teddy's face reddened immediately, but he didn't say anything more about it.

After dinner, Harry went to detention again, but found another note on Snape's office door with directions of what to do while Snape was gone. This time, there were bobotuber pods that needed to be squeezed for pus. Twenty jars worth. Ugh. Snape had been right, though; the tasks he'd set this week had put a serious damper on Harry wanting to serve detention ever again, especially for rules breaking.

It was going on eight-thirty and Harry was perhaps half way through the task when he felt a chilling presence behind him. He turned to see the Bloody Baron gliding through the door.

Harry returned his attention to the pods, squeezing the pus out of the current one with a gentle pressure near the end so it wouldn't explode everywhere. "Did the Professor send you to watch me?"

"He requested that I look in on you. And also asked me to try and get a translation of the Parseltongue in your memory."

"Yeah, well, he can go hang as far as my memories go."

"You're angry."

"Damn right!" He put a little too much pressure on the pod in his hand, and it squirted a line of pus across the table. "Damn!"

"You have every right to be," the Baron said as Harry went about cleaning the spill. At least he hadn't gotten any on his skin or clothes, but it was a near thing.

"Look, could you leave? It's nothing personal," although it was, "but I don't want to mess up again."

The Bloody Baron chuckled. "Not very Slytherin of you, Harry Potter."

Harry glared up at him through his fringe. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you wish me to leave, you should offer me something in return. Something to make it worth my while."

With narrowed eyes, Harry considered, then said, "Well, you want to know about the Parseltongue, right? How about you go away and I write it down for you some other time."

"Alas, written communication is not very useful for ghosts. It's impossible to hold any such objects as might contain writing."

"Oh, yeah." And translating it now basically meant keeping the ghost in the classroom with him, which was not terribly motivating. He bent his head over his task again, and ignored the ghost for as long as he could. Then, "How come we had a conversation?"

"Beg pardon?" The Baron's voice was much closer now than it had been before, and Harry barely kept from jumping away from him and splashing more pus around.

He looked up to see the ghost hovering no more than a pace away, to his left. Glaring again at the ghost for sneaking up on him, he said, "When we were in the corridor. Afterwards, and before I remembered anything else, I remembered us having a conversation, though it was sort of surreal. But then you said that you took over my body right after I got hit by a spell, so we shouldn't have had any time to talk."

"Mmm." The Baron glided into view, and pointed at the bobotuber Harry was holding. "If you make a small incision, just there, the pus will slide out much more easily."

With a frown, Harry tried that, and found it worked well. "Er, thanks." He picked up the next pod. "But are you going to answer my question?"

The Baron gave a low chuckle. "In a way. I don't imagine it's the kind of answer you were really hoping for."

"What kind of answer do you think I'm hoping for?"

"I believe you are hoping I shall slip up in some way, which will allow you to decide that what we say happened in the corridor never actually happened. But since you have your own memories of the events now, you are merely grasping at straws. It's a waste of time, and also rather unbecoming."

Since the Baron was essentially correct, Harry didn't bother to reply to that. "Then what did happen?"

"It was all in your head."

"In my head."

"Indeed. My belief is that you were . . . projecting, for lack of better term, a conversation with me, so that your mind could wrap around the concept of having my presence inside it, without rendering you insane."

"Cause that would've been bad."

"You have no idea."

"Yeah, well, I'm not a shrink or anything, but even I know effing crazy isn't a great way to spend my life."

"Shrink?"

"Head shrinker. You know, a psychiatrist." Harry glanced up at the ghost to find him smiling bemusedly, head cocked to the side. "It's a Muggle thing."

"Ah."

"Yeah."

A long pause, then, "Your scar . . ."

Harry jerked back involuntarily, nearly upending the bottle he was currently filling. "What about it?" he growled.

"It appears more inflamed than yesterday."

"It is."

"Would you care to explain why?"

"Would you care to leave me alone?"

That time, the Bloody Baron laughed out loud. "You're a cheeky thing, no doubt. Very well, Mister Potter. You explain why your scar looks like it's newly cut into your forehead, and I shall leave you in peace. For now."

"For a week."

"Alas, I still must discover the nature of the Parseltongue you heard during our fight."

"Then choose one or the other." Anger flowed through him like his own blood, and Harry's hand was trembling around the bobotuber pod. He stilled it with an effort and gritted his teeth. "Look. I don't like being possessed, and I don't like having people poke around in my head and look at stuff they're not allowed to. And I don't like being blackmailed and I don't like being hovered over. So you get one piece of information from me, and then you get lost."

The Bloody Baron was quiet for a long while, and Harry kept working, and trying not to think. At last, a sigh came from a little farther away. Seemed like the ghost had caught on about the hovering so close bit. "Very well, Harry Potter. Tell me about the Parseltongue."

Harry nodded. He'd known the ghost would ask for that one, and he'd been calling up the memory. "The voice said, 'There has to be an end to it, an end to this half life,' and, 'I did not return to be disobeyed by a lesser servant,' and, 'You are weak, too weak; I need another to sustain me. Bring me his blood.' He said other things, but mostly variations on those."

"Good," The Bloody Baron said. "That will help immensely." He paused, and his voice was softer, smoother, when he continued, "You do want to learn who tried to murder you, do you not?"

"Sure I do," Harry said. "But I'm more interested in keeping it from happening again."

"Naturally."

Harry finished filling up the thirteenth jar, capped it and labeled it, and started on jar fourteen. "You're delaying on your end of the deal."

"So I am," the Baron said. "I must admit, I do not wish to see any harm come to you on your trip back to the common room tonight."

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Harry told him, though he was a little bit afraid.

"Perhaps I will escort you, once you are finished with your most . . . intriguing task."

"The deal--"

"I will wait outside this door until then. Will that suffice?"

With a sigh, knowing he was unlikely to get a better offer, Harry nodded. "Yeah, all right." Then, more grudgingly, "Thanks."

After another forty-five minutes of slicing and squeezing, capping and labeling, then cleaning up after himself, Harry exited Snape's classroom and headed back to the common room. The Bloody Baron floated along beside him all the way to the portrait, just like Snape had done . . . except the floating part.

"Thanks," Harry said again.

"My pleasure," the Baron replied. "You have another session with Severus Snape tomorrow, do you not?"

"No, I mean . . . Oh, damn!" He did have detention, but he also had his first Quidditch practice. At the same time. Well, he'd just have to make up the detention later, since there was no way Flint would let him be on the team if he didn't go to practice. Even an extra week of detention would be better than getting cut. "I have Quidditch practice tomorrow," Harry said at last. He shrugged one shoulder, trying to look unconcerned. "I'll make up the detention some other time."

The Bloody Baron gave him a long look. "And this has been discussed with Professor Snape?"

Harry looked away. He didn't want to talk to Snape, at all. And particularly not to ask if he could skip detention, 'cause he knew what the answer would be. Better to do the thing and beg forgiveness later. Not to mention, Snape must know when practices for Quidditch were; he was the Head of Slytherin, after all. And he wanted Harry on the team. Didn't he? "It'll be fine," Harry said. "He won't mind."

"I see."

"Yeah, so, see you later," Harry said, and slipped in through the portrait door. It was a long time before he fell asleep that night.

TBC . . .

A/N: My apologies on the late updates this week. I've been under the weather, and kind of stressy, what with one thing and another, and have just gotten to feeling a bit better today. Thank you, everyone, for your continued support!

Your reviews are wonderful, like a frozen mocha frappachino with an extra shot, and a side of pumpkin bread with vanilla ice cream. Yum!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 20

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Perhaps, though, he should just have the Baron talk to Potter while the boy prepared more potion ingredients. The ghost seemed far better able to deal with the child – or was more consistent with him, at least – and Severus knew he was likely to be short and snappish this evening, even without Potter's temper thrown into the mix.

Yes, that would work. And it would have the added benefit of freeing Severus to visit the Headmaster and show him a few home truths.

Whilst Harry Potter squeezed out enough bobotuber pus to fill twenty four-ounce bottles, Severus paid a visit to the Headmaster. He had been planning this visit ever since he had directed Potter to the Infirmary the first time, and he was annoyed that he actually had more evidence now to lay at the feet of Dumbledore than less. What had the Headmaster been thinking to leave Potter with Muggles? Especially those Muggles? Minerva had said, more than once, that they were the worst sort. And now he knew exactly what she'd meant.

He had been sickened, really, by the callous disregard with which the Dursleys treated their nephew, the lengths they went to, to ensure he felt unwanted, and the outright viciousness that they let their own progeny get away with in regards to his cousin. The whole thing had made him faintly nauseous, and not only because he knew Lily would have been sick at heart about what had happened to her son.

It was with this sense of indignation on behalf of one of his students that he sat in Dumbledore's office and stared at the man over his folded hands.

"You visited the Dursleys today," Dumbledore said, after Severus had waved away his offer of tea or lemon drop or any other damned thing.

Severus was not even surprised at the Headmaster's knowledge. "I did. I found the circumstances of Mr. Potter's health at the start of term rather troubling, even for someone from a Muggle home, and I wished to find out what I could about those who raised him. It is my practice for all new Slytherins to make a home visit."

"I understand, Severus," Dumbledore said quite calmly. "There's no need to justify yourself."

Severus scowled. With what he had learned today, it was Dumbledore who would need to justify his actions. If he could. "Indeed. And I admit I am troubled by what I learned."

"Ah."

"Ah? That's what you have to say? Did you have any idea what those Muggles subjected him to?"

"He was safe there."

"Define 'safe,'" Severus snarled.

Dumbledore peered at him over the rims of his half-moon spectacles, looking faintly disappointed in Severus' vehemence, but with the beginnings of a glazed expression that Severus knew too well, having seen it many times when they discussed similar problems his Slytherins had suffered in the past. "None of Voldemort's supporters have been able to breach the blood wards enacted on that property on the night after Lily's death. So long as Harry's aunt gives him hearth rights for a minimum of two weeks a year, every year, that will remain true."

"And meanwhile, the Muggles can beat him, starve him, and lock him in a cupboard, as they have for ten years! But that's all fine, isn't it, so long as he doesn't face a potential threat from the Dark Lord, such as the one he has already faced at school."

“Severus, I understand how—”

“You understand nothing!” Severus gripped the arms of the chair till his knuckles turned white. It was always this way, with Albus. He saw everything in the big picture, but never suffered qualms over the details of what his plans and machinations meant to others. Especially when the others were Slytherins. “Do you want another Dark Lord on your hands? You’ll get one if you allow that abuse to continue without stepping in. How will he ever trust the Wizarding world, or not think the worst of the Muggles, if all he knows from both is pain and misery?”

Dumbledore shook his head, his continued calm like a stabbing pain in Severus’ side. “I certainly do not believe it will come to that. I know you have been looking out for the boy since he came to Hogwarts, and from all reports, he is fitting in well with his classmates—”

“And he has almost died twice already!”

“Once by his own hand, of course.”

“Of course.” Severus wasn’t sure, exactly, why he had bothered coming here. It was obvious he was going to need to see to this situation on his own. Potter, having committed the cardinal sin of being sorted in Slytherin, was beneath the Headmaster’s notice.

He swallowed thickly. “I captured some of their memories. Would you like to see what they have done to your Golden Boy?”

Dumbledore waved a hand as if batting away a fly. “That will not be necessary. You will keep a good eye on him, I’m sure. I know how protective you are of your snakes.”

Severus gave him a thin smile and rose. This meeting was done, so far as he was concerned. “Very well. Good evening, Headmaster.”

“Good evening, Severus.”

Rather than look in on the boy – and the Baron, too, no doubt – Severus retreated to the comfort of his quarters and a brand new bottle of firewhiskey. He cracked the seal on the bottle, thinking uncharitable thoughts about the Headmaster, who he had counted as a friend for more than a decade. And more than a friend, a mentor, a guiding hand . . .

Yet, Severus knew that Albus' ambivalence about Potter's plight was nothing new. Albus had, for many years, shunted to the side those issues he did not want to face, as though, if he ignored them, they would simply go away. Often times, for instance, it was the hard cases that ended up in Slytherin, for one reason or another. Those children who had managed to get through their first eleven years with less than the requisite amount of love or caring, or existed on more than their fair share of violence, often found companionship and loyalty among their peers in the House of the Snake. Severus' first rule, laid down on First Night for years now, ensured that.

And Albus, whatever rationale he used to delude himself behind those bright blue eyes, just turned his back in essence. Oh he said he did not wish to interfere in House issues, or get in the way where Severus was obviously far more skilled and already involved, but the truth was, he just did not want to acknowledge the problems so many of these children faced at home, because they were Slytherin problems.

Severus knocked back two fingers of the burning liquid, and poured another glass before he sank in front of the fire and watched the flames flicker and cast orange shadows in his rooms. He had hoped, despite all evidence to the contrary, that Albus would change his stance for Potter. But it was not to be.

Very well, then. As Albus was leaving the boy completely in Severus' hands, then Severus would take him up on the offer of autonomy. Completely.

The next night was Thursday, and after a perfectly horrid day of classes in which no fewer than three cauldrons exploded and a dozen detentions were awarded, Severus, ostensibly grading papers, waited impatiently in his office for the Potter Brat to arrive. Funny how, until

this moment, when the Brat was more than a quarter hour late for his last night of official detention, Severus had gone a full twenty-four hours or more without thinking of him as The Brat.

Shaking off the fit of sentimentality, as it would do neither of them any good, Severus made numerous more red marks on the essay in front of him and wondered where in blue blazes the boy was now. Had he gotten into another literally bloody mess from which he would require rescue and copious amounts of healing? Perhaps he was suffering a fit of pique after Severus' foray into his mind several nights ago? Or maybe he decided he was too good for detentions after all, blowing off the punishment just like his father would have?

Severus had to admit, the last seemed unlikely, as Potter had, thus far, shown remarkable adherence to the detention schedule until now. It was likewise unlikely the Brat had forgotten the session altogether . . . although, it was possible he had assumed he was finished with them now, since he'd been given a week's detention, starting last Thursday, and thus he would have been done last night, Wednesday. But they had discussed the fact of his having missed Saturday, due to his being indisposed, had they not?

Regardless, Severus expected him to be here, and had even set out a crate of dead toads for him to section and remove the organs from, and he was not one who enjoyed being kept waiting.

When it reached half past seven, Severus decided, in lieu of becoming increasingly frustrated, that perhaps the Baron could clarify the matter, and so he called for the ghost to pay him a visit, if he was willing.

It was another few minutes before the Bloody Baron drifted through the wall into his office and hovered by the door. "You rang?"

Severus looked up from his marking, as he would not have for a student, and scowled. "Where is the Potter boy?"

"I should know because . . ."

“Because you saw him last. Did he say anything to you about tonight?”

“Perhaps.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Don’t you play games with me,” Severus snarled. “What did the boy tell you?”

“Are you worried about him?”

Severus was on his feet, giving the ghost his best menacing glare. “Shouldn’t I be? The boy was nearly killed in this dungeon. If I hadn’t got to him in time—”

“But you did. And yes, he said many things to me last night. Most notable was a translation of the Parseltongue from the night of the attack.”

That halted Severus, briefly. He relaxed his stance somewhat. “What was it then?”

The ghost smirked at him. “Do you want to know that, or what he told me about this evening?”

“Oh, for goodness sake. Just give me the damned translation.”

“Language, Severus Snape. You’re sounding just like a school boy I know.”

Severus sneered. “Would it help if I said please?”

“It might at that.” The Bloody Baron smiled, showing teeth. “In between bouts of angst and anger over your treatment of him the night before last, the boy translated the Parseltongue thusly: ‘There has to be an end to it, an end to this half life,’ and, ‘I did not return to be disobeyed by a lesser servant,’ and, ‘You are weak, too weak; I

need another to sustain me. Bring me his blood.' Apparently he said other things as well, but Harry Potter claims they were variations of the same."

Severus nodded, a small sigh escaping him as he sat down again. Whoever attacked the boy wanted his blood. And the 'having returned' part was especially troubling, although if he were to be perfectly honest, he already knew who the Parselmouth was, and he knew who it was that had returned. He just . . . didn't want to. He really didn't. It had been ten good years since the Dark Lord's last stand. Ten long, fulfilling and almost-entirely-free-from-Death Eaters years.

He was going to miss it.

Despite that, he wasn't going to let the Dark Lord take another of his Slytherins away from him, not by recruitment, and especially not by death. So . . . "Yes, I am worried about him." He ran a hand over his face, pausing to pinch the bridge of his nose before gazing up at the Baron again. "Will you tell me where he is?"

The Bloody Baron's eyes narrowed, and he considered Severus for a long moment before he nodded. "I believe the first Slytherin Quidditch practice is this evening. By your own words, he was to be the Seeker."

"Why, that little—"

"I tend to think," the Baron interrupted, as Severus made for the door, "that given your last interaction, yelling will not put you in good stead with the boy."

"He has yet to see me yell!" The door slammed against the wall.

"Indeed," the Baron agreed as he floated faster to keep up with Severus' long strides. "But calling him out in front of his peers will not endear you to him."

"I should care about that?"

“You should . . . but only if you want him to trust you with his secrets.”

Once more brought up short by the Baron’s words, Severus halted in his tracks. Still fuming, he clenched his hands into fists several times before he was calm enough to speak without shouting. But what the Baron said made sense, Slytherin sense, if nothing else. And Severus was self-aware enough that he could recognize the root of much of his wrath was pure relief that the boy was not bleeding in a corner somewhere, beyond help. That he had worried for nothing.

“What’s this about secrets? You know something else, don’t you?” he asked the ghost, once his anger was under control.

“I know very little, actually,” the ghost said, and if he had corporeal form, Severus might have hexed him for his droll response. “Except this: the boy’s scar was inflamed last evening, looking as though it was newly cut.”

“Did he say why?”

For some reason, this amused the Bloody Baron, who chuckled softly before saying, “No, he did not.”

“He was a little snooty about it, wasn’t he.” It wasn’t a question, and the Baron did not reply, but Severus could just imagine the conversation about the scar, given how much trouble the boy had been over just going to the Infirmary. Severus sighed, thinking about the night he had startled the boy in his bed and seen the inflamed scar after the boy had suffered nightmares, and he adjusted his steps to bring him to the Slytherin Common Room instead. “Very well. But for this infraction, he will need to make up not only tonight’s detention, but may be awarded many, many more.”

He would leave a note to that effect where the boy would be sure to find it. And this way, with many of the Brat’s evenings accounted for, Severus could not only keep a close eye on him and his connection to the Dark Lord, but also make sure he was both well protected and that his penchant for rules breaking was thwarted.

The Baron gave him a sly sidelong look. "Of course, Severus Snape, this will put you in his company far more often."

"A regrettable side effect," Severus sighed. Very regrettable indeed.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews! Sorry this chapter was delayed, but my other story, "Walk the Shadows" hit a climactic bit, and I needed to get through it while the muse was hot. Snarky Snape Smirks for everyone!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 21

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Warning: for language

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Harry looked away. He didn't want to talk to Snape, at all. And particularly not to ask if he could skip detention, 'cause he knew what the answer would be. Better to do the thing and beg forgiveness later. Not to mention, Snape must know when practices for Quidditch were; he was the Head of Slytherin, after all. And he wanted Harry on the team. Didn't he? "It'll be fine," Harry said. "He won't mind."

"I see."

"Yeah, so, see you later," Harry said, and slipped in through the portrait door. It was a long time before he fell asleep that night.

Quidditch practice was amazing. Absolutely, mind-blowingly amazing. It didn't hurt that a great deal of it involved flying about on broomsticks and Harry loved the feeling of that, the sensation of wind tearing through his hair, reddening his cheeks and numbing his fingers as they clutched at the broomstick between his knees. Flying was the only thing in the Wizarding world that required no thought on his part; it was all just instinct, and glory and FUN!

The Slytherin team captain, Flint, was a harsh taskmaster, but then, Harry had known that the day Flint ran him in circles to see if he would be a good enough Seeker for the team. He treated everyone the same, though, which Harry was very glad of. He was tired of people either being all gaga over his scar, asking to see it, asking if he really vanquished You Know Who -- as if he had any idea either, beyond what he had read in books -- or else being utter prats, just

because he'd been sorted into Slytherin or because he wasn't a pureblood like Zabini.

Not once, during the entire practice, did Harry think of the detention he was missing. No, he raced his broom -- from the school broom shed -- and chased the snitch, and reveled in the wondrousness of being able to do something he was good at, with no one telling him he was a freak for doing so. He loved it.

After showering in the changing room near the pitch, he walked back to the castle with Draco, who chatted excitedly about maneuvers Flint had the Chasers and Beaters running through, while Harry nodded and smiled. Draco seemed really easy to please, actually, once Harry realized that what the blond wanted was a little recognition that he did things well, too, and also a chance to have fun. They were getting on pretty well these days, in fact.

Once in the castle, he looked sidelong at Harry as they crossed the Entrance Hall. "We missed dinner. You want to come with me to the kitchens and grab something?"

Years of filching food from the Dursleys kitchen after hours had primed Harry for the job. "Sure. Do you know where it is?"

Draco nodded. "From here it's easy. We go down the Puffies corridor, and then follow our noses."

Harry snickered and followed the other boy as they wended their way down to the level of the dungeons, but a ways removed from the Potions classroom and Snape's office. They arrived at a portrait of a very alive looking bowl of fruit, and Draco reached up to tickle his fingers along the side of a juicy looking pear. The portrait door swung open, welcoming them in.

"How'd you know this was here?" Harry asked as they ducked into the kitchen.

"My Father told me. He knew I might get hungry after practice and whatnot."

Draco didn't mention his father very often, and then usually with this sort of calm flippancy, but Harry was reminded of the "talk" they'd both been subject to, in Snape's office, a week ago. He didn't say anything about it now, though, but looked around the kitchen, to see dozens of long, wooden tables, with dozens of short, bulbous eyed creatures with long, floppy ears working at them on various kinds of pastries, breads, soups and pies. It all smelled wonderful. Almost as one, the creatures turned to see who had entered their realm.

"We would like something to eat," Draco announced cheerily. "That is, Harry Potter and I."

A murmur of voices started through the kitchen and wended its way back and forth like a cyclone. Harry could hear his name being whispered, over and over, on the tip of every tongue in sight. He sighed. "Did you have to do that?" he whispered to Draco.

Draco smirked and nodded, as a half dozen of the creatures came forward with trays of sandwiches and puddings and one even had a whole roast chicken surrounded by tiny carrots and braised potatoes.

"Harry Potter has come to the Hogwarts kitchen!" one of the little creatures exclaimed, its voice squeaky and kind of irritating, actually.

"Harry Potter wants food!" another called.

Harry Potter felt his face growing very red, and vowed to get back at Draco, somehow. Later. Now, though, he was hungry. "Er, yeah. I, er, we are really hungry. We just had Quidditch, you know?"

"Harry Potter plays Quidditch!" went up the call throughout the kitchen.

Bloody hell.

Dozens of trays, now, were being shoved in his face, and Draco was taking things from them with abandon, loading up his arms with meat and buns and cakes, so Harry followed suit, and soon they both had their arms full and were backing from the room.

"Harry Potter must return soon!"

"Er, okay. I'll be sure and do that," Harry said hastily, as he and Draco made good their escape.

Once back in the hallway, Draco tore a bite off a chicken leg and led him away from the kitchen by a different corridor, and soon Harry could see where they were, in relation to the Slytherin dorms.

"What the hell was that all about?" Harry asked, his voice muffled around a bite of pasty.

"You're a bloody hero, Harry Potter," Draco said, making Harry's name sound like the creatures had said it, sort of sing-songy. "Even the House-elves love you."

"House-elves? Is that what those things were?"

Draco stopped and stared. "You've never seen a House-elf?"

Harry rolled his eyes and swallowed the pumpkin treat. "Muggle raised, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I forget sometimes. You seem so normal."

Not knowing whether to be insulted or complimented, Harry chose not to respond to the observation at all. Instead he shrugged and started down the hall again. Draco trotted to catch up, and the two of them entered the Slytherin common room together.

They brought all their pilfered booty over to the table their study group met at, and offered to share it around, as there was too much for the two boys to eat on their own. Millicent, who was still struggling with Transfiguration homework, sighed gratefully and took a handful of chocolate biscuits, which she nibbled on, humming happily around the snacks. Even Blaise Zabini accepted some of their largesse, and didn't even make any cutting remarks about it.

Once he'd taken the edge off his hunger, Harry was ready to start his homework, so he went back to his dorm to get his books. There was

only another hour or so before bedtime, but he figured he could get a start on his History of Magic essay before then. If he rose early again, he could finish it up before class tomorrow morning. When he got to his bed, though, he found a folded over note stuck to the top of his trunk.

Inside, the writing was tight and neat, and the script was one he recognized. Unfortunately.

Potter,

Come see me. NOW

S. Snape

With a sigh, Harry tucked the note in his pocket and went back out to the common room, but angled toward the portrait door, instead of going back to his study group. He'd known this would happen, really. He'd just hoped it wouldn't catch up to him until, well, at least tomorrow.

"Hey, Harry!" Millie called. "Where're you going?"

He shook his head, frowning, but then figured, what the hell; they'd find out sooner or later. "Detention."

"Again?" Zabini stared at him, open mouthed, and even a couple others in the common room looked over at him, making his shuffle his feet a bit. Bloody Zabini. "For Merlin's sake, Potter, what the hell is wrong with you? You've been in detention every night since we got here!"

Harry grimaced, and though part of him wanted to just Zabini to shut it, another part wondered if Zabini was on to something. Maybe there was something wrong with him. But all he said was, "Snape's a bastard, okay? Just leave me alone." He slipped out the door and down the corridor toward Snape's office without listening to Millie's commiserations, or Zabini's outrage on behalf of their Head of House, or any of it. He was tired of this crap, really. When was he going to catch a break?

Drawing a deep breath, once he reached Snape's office door, Harry drew up his courage, too. It wasn't as if the man could make him feel worse, really. No matter what he said. He had to let it just roll off him, like when Uncle Vernon got a good head of steam going. Just nod, smile a little, with just the right about of respect, and then go on about his business. No problem. He knocked on the door lightly.

His hope that maybe Snape had already retired to his quarters was dashed a moment later by the command, "Enter."

Harry obeyed, opening the door far enough to slip through, and easing it closed it behind him. Snape was at his desk, as usual, correcting papers. He did not look up. Harry stood perfectly still, hands by his sides, for kind of a long time, by his reckoning, and still Snape did not look up. His legs got tired, actually, standing there, though some of that was probably due to a few hours of flying madly, too.

Harry had just opened his mouth to say something snotty, along the lines of, "I have better things to do that stand here, if you don't mind," when he was saved by the utter idiocy of that action by Snape's head snapping up, his coal black eyes glittering malevolently.

"You will kindly tell me, Mr. Potter, what you were thinking to miss your appointment with me this evening." His voice was no louder than a whisper, but the tight anger it so obviously held in check was all the more frightening for it. Harry had heard that tone of voice a number of times in his life, and he never liked what followed.

He swallowed, hard, then brought his chin up, just a fraction. No weakness. Show no weakness. "I had Quidditch practice."

The black eyes narrowed. "And yet, you had a previous engagement here, with a crate of dead toads. They will not debone themselves."

He couldn't help but make a face, though really, it was only a little twist of his lips. Really. Dead toads? As if the murtlap tentacles hadn't been bad enough. Then he recalled the conversation he had had with Snape the night of tentacle pickling, the night he had also handed

over the written account of what rules he would and would not follow and why. "I'm sorry, sir. I was . . . since it was our first practice, I didn't want to miss it. I thought you'd rather Captain Flint not kick me off the Slytherin team." He didn't add, 'since it was your idea to put me on it,' as it wasn't necessary.

Snape's mouth pursed, and his gaze grew sharper, as if he knew Harry was trying to play him. "You are insolent and impertinent. You have no respect for me or my limited time. You could have come to me today and requested a chance of time for your detention."

Harry frowned, and allowed a bit of daring. "And you would have agreed, sir?"

The man sneered. "We will never find out now, will we?" He gestured imperiously to his classroom, beyond the connecting door. "There is a crate of toads next to your worktable, along with the instructions for their rendering. Get to work."

Harry glared. He wasn't going to even get a chance to start his homework tonight, and if this job took as long as some of the others, he'd be getting to bed well after midnight. Again. Damn it. But he deserved it, really, for ditching. After taking a slow breath, Harry nodded tightly and turned on his heel, to head into the classroom.

"Oh, and Potter?"

Harry didn't turn around, but said, quietly, knowing if he growled at the man, he would probably face his mockery along with everything else. "Yes, sir?"

"That's another week of detention. For your disrespect."

At that, Harry did turn, mouth agape. "Sir!"

"Yes, Mr. Potter?" The Professor's face was hard, unyielding.

Harry bit his lip. The assignment was unfair, and quite possibly unjustified, and both of them knew it. But the only thing Harry would get out of an argument would be more time deboning or otherwise

taking apart once-living potion ingredients. He knew how that went. More chores on top of the ones he already had, for his cheek. So he clenched his teeth instead, determined to get through yet another bloody week of detention, without getting any more time added, even if it killed him.

But what about Quidditch? He softened his expression, showing a proper amount of respect, but not lowering his gaze. "Yes, sir. I understand." Boy, did he ever. "But, I . . . I mean, would it be all right to change the time for detention on the nights of Quidditch practice?"

Snape gave him a thin smile. "It seems you can learn, after all, Mr. Potter. We shall see about changing the times. If I am satisfied with your other work, perhaps."

Making himself nod again, Harry wanted to yell at the man, but he knew better than that, even if he hated being condescended to, especially in that sneering tone. But he knew from years of experience that yelling at the ones who had power over him very rarely earned him anything good. "Yes, sir. Thank you."

"The toads await, Mr. Potter."

"Yes, sir." Harry sighed heavily and went to work, cursing Snape with every cut and slice and bit of toad gut or liver or heart that squished through his fingers. The man was a bastard. A complete and utter bastard. How in the hell was he ever going to catch up in his classes, when his every evening was spent in this godforsaken classroom, cutting up godforsaken creatures and being glared at by a godforsaken, goddamned git of a professor?

Unaccountably, he felt the hot pinprick of tears in his eyes, and he hurriedly blinked them back. He would not cry. Not because of Snape, and not for his missed bloody homework or more detentions or any of it. He breathed through his mouth for a few minutes, the better to control his emotions. He hadn't cried for years, not since he was like four or five, so why would he start now, anyway? The Dursleys were much worse than this. Here, at least, he got to play Quidditch, and he could eat whenever he wanted, really, and no one -- except some murderous Parselmouth freak in the dungeon -- was hurting him,

certainly not beating him up every day or chasing him up trees. He had friends. People who seemed to actually like him. And no one called him freak all the time or ever locked him in a cupboard.

So what if he had to stay up late to do his homework? He'd always had to do his homework twice or more at the Dursleys, since Dudley would often swipe his and either try and turn it in as his own, or else destroy it by flushing it down the toilet or something. And so what if Snape hated him? It wasn't like he wanted the man to like him or anything, especially not after he'd tried to rifle through Harry's memories the other night. He certainly didn't expect the man to care about him or anything, not even after he'd said he believed Harry about the Dursleys and their stupid, stupid rules.

"A little less pique," came a smooth voice behind him, making his jump slightly. "The hearts are meant to remain intact."

"Sorry, sir," Harry muttered, and loosened his grip on the offending organ, dropping it whole into the bowl that was a quarter full of them now. The liver and spleen followed, into their respective bowls. Then he made three quick slices with the sharp knife to expose the rear leg bones, and removed them with minimal effort, dropping them in the pile of waste to the right. The skull cracked open with a double tap of the knife handle, and Harry removed the brain, dropping it in its own bowl. He continued working, the knife almost moving of its own accord, as he wondered why the Potions Master felt the need to watch every little stupid thing he did.

"Your scar is inflamed."

Harry jumped again, and the knife skittered across the chest muscles of the toad, but missed his fingers, fortunately. Though Snape's words weren't a question, he seemed to be waiting for a reply. Well, what he wanted? A medal for noticing? Setting his jaw, Harry said, "Yes, sir."

"Why?"

Almost wishing the man would move to the other side of the table, so Harry could see his expression, Harry shrugged. "It was hurting."

There was a long pause before Snape said, "Have you had another nightmare then?"

Harry wanted to say, 'Only when I get a chance to sleep, which isn't often, you great git!' but didn't, as it would hardly be productive. He dropped another toad liver in the bowl. And there was no sense in lying about it, not really, especially since he had considered telling Snape about it anyway, except for him being such a memory stealing, mind-looking into, detention giving arse. Besides, it was stupid to try and hide this information when it might help to find the one who'd tried to murder him. He knew that, but he was just so angry at the professor lately. With a small sigh, he said, "No, sir. It started hurting in Defense class, yesterday."

Another long pause. "Why did you not inform me immediately?"

Oh, yeah, right, Harry thought. 'Cause you're so bloody approachable. "It stopped hurting right after I left class. Teddy went with me to see Madam Pomfrey," he left off the part about needing to be convinced to go, "and she gave me a pain reliever for it. So it was fine."

"It ceased bothering you right after you left class?" Snape asked, and he finally moved into Harry line of sight. His face was paler than usual, if that were possible.

"Yeah. Sorry. I mean, yes, sir. But I wasn't trying to get out of class or anything. It really did stop. Like the only reason it was hurting was because of Quirrell's stuttering."

Snape's head came up sharply and his dark eyes were piercing. "Has your scar ever hurt while in Professor Quirrell's presence previously?"

"I, er . . ." Harry had to think about it for a minute, while he continued sectioning a toad and disposed of the leg bones. Finally, he nodded. "I think so, sir. I mean, I don't know if it's his presence, actually, or just when he stares at me sometimes. It happened at breakfast once."

Snape nodded thoughtfully, lips pursed again as he watched Harry work.

Harry hesitated, knife slowing, then, "Do you think he's the one who tried to kill me?"

"It is . . . possible, Mr. Potter. But I will determine what threat he poses. And I will ask you to be very cautious to never be alone with him, do you understand me? "

"Yes, sir." He looked down at the worktable again, and finished the last few cuts on that toad, tossing the waste into one pile, the organs and skin into their own piles.

As he reached for the next toad, Snape said, "That will be all, Mr. Potter. You are dismissed."

Knowing better than to argue -- the last time he'd tried, he'd almost been slapped with more detention -- Harry quickly said, "Yes, sir. Thank you," and cleaned up after his work, putting the tools away when he was done.

Snape watched him the whole time, not angrily anymore, but with that blank face that meant he was surprised or upset. Harry didn't dare ask him what more was wrong, but left quickly, and was back to the common room soon enough that he even had a little time to address his homework before bed.

Maybe Snape wasn't such an enormous bastard after all.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 22

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Snape watched him the whole time, not angrily anymore, but with that blank face that meant he was surprised or upset. Harry didn't dare ask him what more was wrong, but left quickly, and was back to the common room soon enough that he even had a little time to address his homework before bed.

Severus watched the boy leave after his late detention, and sighed heavily. Potter had been far less confrontational than he had expected -- far less than James bloody Potter would have been in similar circumstance, that was certain. And Severus had almost wanted him to protest more, to get more cheeky and arrogant, so that he could justify his own, still deep seated beliefs about the boy. But it was no good. Even when being handed additional punishments and insults on top of it, the boy remained -- for the most part -- rather polite and obedient.

It was very frustrating.

He heard a chuckle, behind him, and he whipped out his wand as he turned, to find the Bloody Baron smirking at him from the door to his office. "You appear discomfited, Severus Snape."

"Get out of my way," Severus growled, and moved toward the doorway, "Or I'll go right through you."

"Impertinent child," the ghost grunted, but glided aside.

In his office, Severus marked down the new detentions he had planned for the Brat Who Wouldn't Be Cheeky On Command, and

glowered at the Baron when the ghost came to hover over his shoulder and peer at his mark book.

"Don't you think you have taken up quite enough of the boy's study time, Severus Snape?" A ghostly finger pointed at the details of Potter's schedule for the next week, and the utter lack of any free time in it.

"Of course not. He can study after detention."

"Mm. When he is supposed to be sleeping?"

Severus pursed his lips. "He has a free period on Tuesdays."

"Ah. I'm sure his other professors will appreciate your forward thinking, in regards to his study time."

With another glower, Severus snapped the book closed. "What business is it of yours, anyway?"

The ghost shook his head and spoke slowly, as if to a child. "Harry Potter is one of ours, Severus Snape. He is Slytherin. You should not continue to make it difficult for him to succeed, nor torment him so."

"I am. Not. Tormenting. Him."

"Ah," the ghost said again, and Severus would have hexed him if he weren't incorporeal. "Alas, I suspect he will not last another week with this schedule, without breaking down. As such, I shall keep watch for him, as you seem to have abrogated your duty."

"You dare--" Severus started, but the annoying ghost floated from the room without looking back. Damnation!

The Baron couldn't be right, could he? The boy seemed to be doing fine in his classes so far, from what he had heard from the other professors. No one had any complaints about his work. Well, Minerva had that one day where she said Potter turned in an essay late, and his handwriting was difficult to parse, but that was hardly indicative of a trend, was it? Oh, and Binns had complained about late work as

well and inattentiveness in class, but then, the ancient ghost could barely recognize his students from one day to the next.

Then, of course, Blaise Zabini, one of his Firsties, had come complaining that Potter never showed up for their study groups . . . well, of course he didn't! He was serving detention! He'd set the Zabini whelp down hard, and let him know that his insights on Potter's situation were not appreciated.

Realizing he was pacing in his small office, Severus stopped, closed up the room, and returned to his quarters, where he could think better, especially with a full two fingers of Ogden's Finest in hand. More important, by far, than the Potter Brat's study time or lack thereof, was the information he had received about Quirrell. If Quirrell was, indeed, the conduit for the Dark Lord's return, then Severus would have to step very carefully around the man, while at the same time, not letting him have another go at Potter. He would also need to make sure no one suspected him of treating Potter at all differently than he would if he was still one of the Dark Lord's servants. That would be harder, for the Baron was right; Potter was a Slytherin, and he could not in good conscience pretend otherwise. No one would understand, least of all the boy.

It was a tricky dance, and one he had hoped not to resume for a long time.

He considered the issue for some time, weighing possible actions on his own part, as well as what he would tell the Headmaster – about Quirrell, specifically – before retiring for the night.

The next few days passed rather quickly. Severus had numerous potions to make, for both the infirmary and his own private stores. His classes needed extra preparation so early in the term, too, and then there was Potter. True to his word, the Bloody Baron seemed to have taken it upon himself to act as the boy's personal guardian, following him to classes and hovering near him in the Great Hall at meals -- the ones the boy attended anyway, which looked to be about one in three; breakfasts, primarily, where he continued to down his nutrition potion as commanded, and little else, much to Severus' annoyance. In addition to making himself more present than usual, the Baron

gave Severus more than his fair share of baleful looks, thank you very much, even during the boy's Potions class.

Bloody ghost.

During Potions, Severus made sure to call on the boy to answer questions from the actual assigned reading – unlike the previous time, when he'd been set on proving to the boy that he could not trust his peers to not change sides with whatever way the wind blew – and the boy answered appropriately, if not completely. Though Severus sent a smirking smile at the Baron, who was lurking in the corner, he did notice that the boy appeared . . . tired, and a bit disinterested in the topic. His mouth was drawn tight, his face more pale than Severus had seen it since his first mandatory trip to the infirmary, and Potter kept his head down for the most part, not even looking Severus in the eye when he answered questions. It was . . . unlike him. Severus had gotten used to a certain amount of cheek or, at the very least, determination, from the boy. This apparent apathy was . . . troubling.

More troubling, however, was the Baron's eye-roll in response to Severus' smirk, not to mention the challenging looks being thrown his way every time he accosted the boy, by young Mr. Nott, the Bullstrode girl, and, surprisingly enough, Draco Malfoy. Even one or two of the Gryffindors kept peering at Potter in concern. It was enough to drive Severus mad.

However, over the course of the following few days, Potter's detentions went as smoothly as could be expected, with the boy doing the work he was assigned, and answering direct questions, but otherwise remaining silent. For his part, Severus left him to his work, only making a comment if the boy needed correction, which was gratifyingly infrequent. Deftly and quietly, Potter removed stingers from a large box of billywigs, shredded several pouches of boomslang skin, then squeezed a barrel of bundimuns and one of glumbumbles for their secretions.

During each detention, Severus worked on correcting essays and marking potions, or adjusted his lesson plans, or considered further the issue of Professor Quirrell. During his talk with Dumbledore, the Headmaster had made it clear that Severus was responsible for

getting to the bottom of whatever was going on with the Defense Professor, despite protestations that he was not the man's superior in any legal way – though he naturally was in most other ways.

Drafted old coot.

Thus, Severus found himself accosting the Stuttering Wonder just after breakfast on Monday morning.

After finding the offensive-smelling professor in the third floor corridor – where he should not have been, under any circumstances other than the Stone being at risk, as it was not his turn to patrol the area – Severus pushed the man against the wall. With his arm across Quirrell's throat, Severus snarled, "What, exactly, do you think you are doing?"

"I d-d-don't know wh-wh-what you mean, S-s-severus."

"I mean, why on earth would you be in this corridor, at this time?"

"I-I-I thought I heard a n-n-noise?"

"Are asking me or telling me, Quirrell? I believe your next turn of duty here is not until Wednesday. I daresay you have better ways to spend your time until then."

"I-I-I th-th-thought I-I should ch-ch-check it out, Severus, the n-n-noise. It's v-v-very im-p-p-portant to k-k-keep the Phi-phi—"

"Shut up, you sorry nitwit! Do you think the Headmaster wants you to blather on mindlessly about what he is keeping hidden?"

"N-n-no, of c-c-c-c-c-course not." Quirrell gasped for breath, looking almost in tears.

"Of course not," Severus agreed. He eased up on the man's windpipe and moved back, allowing Quirrell to straighten his robes and pull himself together. Eyes still narrowed, Severus dropped his voice to a whisper. "I want to be quite sure you understand, Professor, that the Headmaster is keeping a very close eye on anyone he suspects of

having . . . less than ideal loyalties to his way of thinking. Anyone. Is that clear enough for you?”

“Y-y-yes, Severus. I-I-I underst-st-stand.”

“Good. I should not see you here again until Wednesday, should I?”

“N-n-no, Severus.”

Severus let the man go, and watched to make sure he indeed left the third floor. Was Quirrell going to try and take the Philosopher’s Stone? If so, there was quite a bit more at stake than he had previously considered. With a sigh, Severus went to see Dumbledore again, to share his latest concerns. And once more, Dumbledore nodded and gave assurances, and then left most of the work of keeping an eye on the annoying Professor Quirrell to Severus.

On Tuesday, the day of the next Slytherin Quidditch practice, Severus sent a note to Potter during breakfast, telling him he could come perform his detention during his free period instead of in the evening. Very kind of him, he thought. And understanding.

He watched the boy receive the note, saw Potter’s momentary scowl morph into a look of resignation as the boy pushed his plate away and started to rise from the table. When he said something quietly to Theodore Nott, Nott read the note over his shoulder, then sent a glare at the Head Table, specifically at his Potions Professor. Severus lifted an eyebrow in return, and the boy looked away, but not before he murmured something to the Potter boy. Potter shrugged and grabbed up his book bag before heading out of the Hall.

Nott then spoke quickly and quietly to several of the other Firsties, heads bent together at their end of the table, and the lot of them rose and went after Potter.

Severus shook his head at their shenanigans, and applied himself to his meal.

Minerva leaned towards him. “A bit of dissent in your ranks, Severus?”

Severus swallowed a bite of toast with orange marmalade and lifted an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?"

"Your Firsties look on the verge of rebellion, perhaps on behalf of a certain Mr. Potter."

"Nonsense," he scoffed, and took a sip of tea.

"I notice you've had Mr. Potter in detention nearly every day since the start of term. Is he really so unmanageable?"

Tempted to tell her yes, that the Boy Who Had Even the Bloody Baron Wrapped Around His Littlest Finger was as arrogant and impertinent as his father had been, Severus resisted the impulse. Instead, he murmured noncommittally, "He needs a close eye kept on him."

"That wouldn't have anything to do with him ending up in the hospital wing his first weekend at school, would it?"

"Perhaps," Severus allowed. He took another sip of tea, and forbore telling Minerva to butt out of Slytherin business.

"It's not my place to say as much," Minerva started, and Severus knew she would anyway, "but I think you're being too hard on the boy."

"You're right," Severus said with a scowl, and rose, throwing his serviette on the table with a little too much force, so it landed in the remainders of his too-runny eggs. "It's not your place."

Her mouth was pursed as she watched him leave, but as long as she did not stop him or attempt to scold him further, he did not care a whit.

Why was it that everyone sought to tell him his duty?

For the period just after lunch – another meal which Potter did not attend, damn him; how was the boy to put on weight if he didn't eat? – when Potter was due for his make up detention, Severus laid out

several dozen rats to be sectioned and harvested for spleens, hearts, livers and tails. The boy should be able to get through them in an hour without trouble.

Potter arrived right on time, with the Bloody Baron floating silently in his wake, looking censorious but otherwise not acknowledging his existence. Severus pointed toward his classroom, and told Potter to begin. The boy said nothing beyond his customary, "Yes, sir," and went right to work.

This time, however, Severus followed him. He watched the boy roll up his sleeves, and check the written instructions before starting to section the rats. Potter seemed not to be squeamish at all, which some children were, he knew, especially those who were Muggleborn or raised. But then, the boy hadn't balked at any of the other tasks set for him the last couple weeks either.

The Bloody Baron hovered next to him, and the two seemed to be conversing . . . or, rather, the Baron was speaking in a low voice, and Potter was responding with occasional shrugs or shakes of his head. The boy's shoulders were slumped more than Severus had seen them previously, but he did not appear to be in any actual pain. His scar was not inflamed, Severus had noted when Potter first came in, so he didn't bother asking about nightmares or occasions of proximity to Quirrell. Once more, however, the Baron sent frequent glares at Severus, but Severus ignored them.

Deciding he had seen – and been glared at – enough, Severus returned to his office and his own work.

The day seemed to be going swimmingly, in fact, until Marcus Flint appeared in his office at half nine that night, glowering more than usual.

"Something I can do for you, Mr. Flint?" Severus asked, not looking up from his marking.

"Just thought you should know, sir," the Prefect said in an angry growl, "that the Potter kid's in the Infirmary."

“What?” Severus was on his feet in a heartbeat. “What happened?”

Flint shook his head. “Had a bit of a meltdown, he did, and tried to act the Beater. Without a bat. Took on a couple Bludgers, but broke his arm, and couple of ribs, most like. Lucky he stayed on his broom.”

Severus sighed and took his seat again. Of all the . . . “Very well, Mr. Flint. If that will be all?”

Flint glared and stood his ground. “Sir . . . they’re saying . . .” His broad face screwed up with the attempt to think or put excess words in order.

“Spit it out, Flint, I haven’t got all night.”

“Yes, sir. Well . . . they’re saying you’ve got it in for him. That Potter’s up all hours doing his homework, and even has to skip meals to get it done, seeing as how he’s in detention every night, and even on his free periods. They’re saying you’ve done him wrong.”

Severus pressed his lips together, and his hands clenched into fists. “Potter went whinging to you, did he?”

“No, sir.” Flint shook his head. “Not at all. Kid hasn’t said a word. He’s made of stone, that one. His mates say he even told ‘em to lay off coming to me about him. But they – the other Firsties – they’re worried about him not getting enough sleep or regular meals or anything. They pester me about every day, asking what I can do to help him, and they saw he was gonna break, before I did. I even had a pack of Third Years ask me why he’s never at meals when he’s so scrawny.

“Never heard a word of complaint from Potter, though, like I said, so I figured he could handle it fine.” A brief, toothy grin. “Till practice today, anyway. Never seen anyone so mad. Right ripped he was. Wouldn’t’ve stopped, neither, even after the Bludgers got him, if I hadn’t made him hit the deck. Looked like he wanted to go another round. It’s like he feels no pain or something.”

Flint's barrage of words took a few minutes to sink in, and when they did, they broke through some kind of . . . mental barrier that Severus realized he had erected in his dealings with Potter. He peered at the Prefect for a long moment before nodding slowly. The wall he had placed the boy – the son of the hated James Potter – behind now crumbled, and he saw his recent actions far more clearly. Severus Snape had become the bully. The unreasonable ogre. The uncompromising autocrat in the boy's life, and the replacement for his unfeeling and abusive relatives.

He had neglected what he knew the boy needed – someone to watch out for him and make sure he was fitting in, and dealing with the effects of an abusive home – in favor of taking perverse pleasure in ordering him about like he was a miniature James, or worse, a mere pawn in the war . . . just as Albus would have. He would not have treated any of his other Snakes like this. He could no longer pretend otherwise. Nor could he pretend, based on Flint's report – plus, he had to admit, the Bloody Baron's, and even McGonagall's – that what he was doing was for the boy's own good, to build him up stronger and more resilient than before.

As Potter's "meltdown" on the pitch indicated, that was clearly not the case.

"Very well," Severus said heavily. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Mr. Flint. If that will be all?"

Flint was quiet for a moment, as if taking Severus' measure, and Severus let him. He had failed the Potter boy. Again. Finally, however, Flint nodded. "Yes, sir, thank you." He paused at the door, hand on the knob. "The Quidditch lads are in the infirmary with him now, sir. They want their Seeker back, too. He's little good to us, broken like this."

"Thank you, Mr. Flint," Severus said, and listened to the door close before he put his head in his hands and let the shame wash over him.

Well.

He clearly had some make up work ahead of him. The largest question, of course, was would Potter give him yet another chance?

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews! You guys are made of teh awesome!

Alas, for the next few weeks, I will be engaged in work related program activities at my day job, which will (gasp!) take away from the time I would normally devote to writing. (The bastards! Making me do work at work!) Thus, updates might be a bit more sporadic until mid November. But no worries, just because I may not post two or three times a week, doesn't mean I won't do so as often as I can.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 23

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Snape watched him the whole time, not seeming angry anymore, but with that blank face that meant he was surprised or upset. Harry didn't dare ask him what more was wrong, but left quickly, and was back to the common room soon enough that he even had a little time to address his homework before bed.

Maybe Snape wasn't such an enormous bastard after all.

Over the next few days, however, Harry decided that yes, yes he was.

The week dragged by.

Every evening in detention, he spent hours – four or even five sometimes, depending on how long it took to get through the job – preparing the most disgusting potions ingredients known to man. Squeezing a barrel of bundimuns was as revolting as the bobotubers had been, and there was far more of them, besides. And the bloody billywigs! Tiny little stingers that snagged under your fingernails like nettles if you weren't careful, and many times, even if you were. His hand was sore for days after, bad enough he could hardly hold his quill properly when doing his homework . . . which he had to skip meals to get done anyway since all his time was taken up with bloody detention.

Stupid Snape.

In addition, his scar ached almost constantly, and though he used the ointment that Madam Pomfrey had given him the first week of school, to keep it from looking nasty and infected, the balm did nothing for the

sharp, burning pain he had in each Defense Against the Dark Arts class, or when he went to the Great Hall for meals and saw Professor Quirrell there. Not did it help the dull, throbbing ache he woke with every night and/or early morning when he had nightmares. It was getting so he didn't bother going to sleep if he could help it, since he wasn't going to get anything for his troubles except a pain in the head and visions of blood and death and horror.

He wondered what Snape was doing about Quirrell, if anything, and if they were ever going to dismiss the man who had tried to kill him, or hold him at all accountable. But he didn't want to ask that git for anything. He asked the Bloody Baron about it, though, since the ghost had taken to following Harry around, and talking with him sometimes, which was kind of nice, really, if a little weird.

On Monday night, the ghost said nothing more had been done about Quirrell, except that Snape had had an argument with him that morning, about something that was none of Harry's business. But the Baron agreed with Harry that yes, his Head of House was a right arse for assigning him additional detentions every night when he was tired and lagging behind in his classes already, and he stayed with Harry during each one, telling him it was okay, that he'd get through it. Just a bit longer, Harry, it'll be okay.

Teddy was a good friend, too, he and Millie, and when Harry had to beg off meals to do his homework, they brought him things smuggled out of the Great Hall in their robes – like toast and bangers and apples – to stave off the worst of his hunger. He didn't tell them he'd had much worse from his relatives, days of not eating anything, sometimes, and locked in a cupboard besides, but just said that he was grateful for their help. And once, when Harry had nothing to turn in for History of Magic, as he'd not had time to read the material never mind do a two foot essay, Teddy even offered to copy his own homework for him, but Harry told him absolutely not. He was not going to get Teddy in trouble for cheating, no way.

The only class he made absolutely sure not to shirk in was Potions. He was not to going to give Snape any excuse at all to assign more detentions. Harry read the material at least twice, and turned in every assignment on time, with essays rewritten as often as necessary, to

make them perfect, occasionally with Teddy's input, or Draco's. In Potions class, though, he was too tired to do more than answer the Professor's questions perfunctorily, but at least Snape didn't take any points or mock him like he had that first time.

On Tuesday at breakfast, he was looking forward to his free period so much, figuring to get work done for his afternoon classes, plus have an actual lunch with his friends, that he almost burst into tears when he got the note from Snape saying he would serve his detention during that period instead of in the evening, because of Quidditch practice.

But he was not going to let Snape get to him. Never!

Instead, he swallowed his anger, gathered up his things, told Teddy he'd catch him later, and made his way out of the Great Hall so he could get the reading for Transfiguration done. Stupid, great, bloody GIT!

To his surprise, Teddy followed him out a few minutes later, with Millie and Draco, Pansy, Vince and Greg, and all the rest of the First Years. Even Zabini! They found him in the courtyard where he had opened his text already, sitting along one of the low walls with his knees drawn to his chest to prop up the book.

And then Millie was yelling, her hands balled into fists and her face bright red, saying that they should go the Headmaster! Or the Board! "My Uncle Sebastian is on the Board, you know," she told them, "And he'll see to it that Snape is run right out for what he's doing to one of us Slytherins!"

"All right, Millie, all right," Draco said. "My father is on the Board, too, but I don't know if they can really do anything . . . I mean, Snape's not really going against school rules—"

"Rule One!" Millie howled, and the others shushed her; the gathering, for all it had a dozen participants, was quiet and covert as anything else Slytherins did together. "Slytherins are the House, remember? You assist your housemates when they need assistance! He told us

himself! And now he's picking on Harry and bringing all of us down. It's disgusting!"

For his part, Harry tried to ignore their conversation as it eddied around him, and tried desperately to get through the Transfiguration chapter. It was no good, though, especially when the pain in his head flared to almost mythic proportions and he had to pinch his nose, hard, to keep from blacking out.

"Harry?" Teddy said softly, at his elbow. "You all right?"

Harry made himself nod. "Just tired," he said. "It'll be fine; I've just a couple more days."

"If you're sure," Teddy started, but over his voice was Pansy Parkinson's, "Millie's right, though. I say we go to Flint again. He's got to put a word in."

"What?" Harry yelped. This was the first he'd heard of anyone talking to their Prefect, of all things. "What're you going to Flint for?"

"Cause it's not right, Harry," Greg said. "We all know it. He's being a right bastard to you, and it's like he doesn't even care about Rule One."

"I don't care," Harry told them. "About him, I mean. I don't. I can handle it. Don't go carrying on to Flint; he'll think I'm a right prat."

"He won't," Teddy said. "He knows already. Said even some Third Years asked him about all the meals you've missed."

"Look," said Harry, and let go of his nose, since pinching it so hard was making his fingers ache. "Really, it's just a couple days. I'm not gonna give the bastard any reason to lump me with more detention, all right?"

"Harry," Teddy said quietly while some of the others stared at him like he'd grown extra limbs, as if they had never even considered the possibility that Snape might actually assign him more time, when it was almost all Harry thought about these days. As they erupted into

another argument about what the best thing to do was, Teddy continued, in a low voice so no one else could hear, "I know you haven't been sleeping either."

"It's okay, I just don't--"

Teddy shook his head. "It's not. I know you've been putting up a Silencing Charm. You've been having nightmares, and--"

"Have you been spying on me?"

"No," Teddy said quickly. "I woke up one night and saw you screaming, but I couldn't hear anything. You should see Madam Pomfrey, so she can give you something. There are potions that can stop you from dreaming."

"I don't think it'll help," Harry said, in an almost whisper.

"Why not?"

"I don't think they're regular dreams," he admitted. He considered it more, and decided to tell Teddy the truth. Teddy had been nothing but a friend to him since the moment they met, and he would not lie to his first real friend. "I think . . . I think they're memories." He paused and worked up his courage, and added, "Of Voldemort."

Teddy's face drained of color so quickly that Harry thought for a moment that he might faint, but then the thin boy shook his head, his eyes wide. "H-h-how can you tell?"

"I dunno, it's just--" They were interrupted by the warning bell, and Harry sighed. Now he'd have to race through the work at lunchtime. "Later. I'll tell you later."

The Slytherins, some of them still shooting looks at Harry, collected themselves and made their way to class as a group.

Despite his intentions, Harry didn't have a chance to talk any more to Teddy during the day, which was probably just as well. During lunch, he studied in an out of the way place he had discovered in the library,

where he was extremely unlikely to be disturbed. Over the last week or so, interestingly enough, he often found himself sharing table space with Hermione Granger from Gryffindor, the girl who had spoken up for him the day he caught Longbottom's Remembrall. She was studious, too, and very quiet, although every once in a while, she would ask him what he thought about a reading, and they would discuss it. It was . . . nice, to talk to someone who wasn't constantly trying to figure him out, and to get a different perspective on their classes than he got from the rest of the Slytherins.

Then, right after lunch, he had detention. This time, he had to dissect rats and remove their organs, tails and other nasty bits.

Merlin's pants.

Fortunately, Snape gave him just enough work to fill the hour, as opposed to making him miss class or needing to come back after Quidditch practice, but it was disgusting work, and slow going until he got into the rhythm of it.

The Bloody Baron hovered next to him, offering tips here and there, and shooting glares over Harry's shoulder. Even with his back to Snape's office door, Harry knew the man was staring at him, and he wanted nothing more than to turn and shove this boning knife into the bloody git's guts. It would feel soooo good.

Briefly.

A boy could dream, couldn't he?

"Just two more days, Harry," the Baron murmured as he finished scooping out the organs of his seventh rat, depositing the last of the waste in the bucket beside the worktable. "You're doing fine."

Harry sighed and nodded. The muscles were bunched in his back and arms, and he felt an itch between his shoulder blades, where Snape was obviously staring. Why couldn't he just go away? Why did he need to pick, pick, pick? Harry was getting really close to just screaming at the man, but he knew from experience that screaming at one's tormentor never led anywhere good. Better to just acquiesce,

let it all flow over him like a calm river, and wait for it to end. Better to ignore the feel of injustice, the ache of weariness, and just let go.

"I spoke with him before," the Baron admitted. "Like your friends did with Flint."

Harry's head came up and he glared. Before he could ask, Why, for pity's sake, the Baron continued, "You are Slytherin, and therefore one of my own. I will protect you, even if from your Head of House."

Harry shook his head a little and wanted to say, Don't bother. It'll just make him angrier, but he was too tired to argue.

"He is quite unreasonable when it comes to you."

Harry snorted softly. He knew that, had known it since the morning he had been yanked out of the shower and shaken like a rag doll. He sliced through the tendons on the rat's back legs, then twisted and wrenched them from the sockets, tossing them into the "leg" pile. "Why, though? I don't get it."

The Bloody Baron floated closer still, and when Harry glanced at him, he could have sworn the expression on the ghost was sad. "Severus Snape has a history of . . . difficulty with Potters," he said at last.

Harry frowned, head cocked to the side. "My Dad?"

The ghost nodded. "Alas, the two were enemies when they were in school, and I fear your professor might not have left the past to lie as he should."

Harry's shoulders slumped even further as he sliced the ragged ends of arteries off the rat's heart and plopped the thing in a bowl. He should have known it was something like that. His aunt and uncle, who were meant to care for him when he was growing up, had hated him, because they hated magic, and hated his mother. Professor Snape, who was meant to be looking out for him at Hogwarts, according to his own words and rules, hated him because of his father, a man Harry had no memories of at all, except in dreams.

He just could not win.

"Harry?"

"S'okay," Harry said. His eyes stung, and his nose felt like he was about to sneeze. He clenched his jaw till the feeling passed. "I'm used to it."

The Bloody Baron sent another glare at the doorway, but the professor was gone already. Harry had sensed him leaving a few minutes before. Didn't matter anyway.

Just didn't matter at all.

"Come, child." The Baron's voice was gentle as he gestured to the shrinking pile of still intact rats. "You're almost there."

Harry nodded, drew a deep breath to banish the sudden ache in his chest, and reached for the next one.

He was late for Quidditch practice.

That in and of itself would not have been a big deal, if Captain Flint had not laid in to him the minute he did arrive.

"Where the hell were you, Potter?" he yelled. "We've been waiting for almost ten minutes. Couldn't you be bothered to be a team player?"

"I was in the Library, sir," Harry said, scrambling into his uniform. He didn't admit he had fallen asleep over his books, only to be woken by Hermione, who he'd mentioned the practice to during their lunchtime study. Thank Merlin she had remembered.

"Study on your own time, Potter," Flint growled. "Not on mine."

Well, he would if he could, but since his time was pretty damned limited these days . . .

But Flint wasn't done. "I've half a mind to bench you for our first game, let Malfoy be Seeker. He was here on time. He didn't keep the rest of us waiting for him like some bloody celebrity."

Harry saw red, clenching his jaw so hard his teeth ground together noisily. "It won't happen again, Captain Flint," he promised.

"Yeah, we'll see. Get the hell up there, boy."

Harry gave a jerky nod and mounted his broom, angling the school-issue Cleansweep toward the sky in as sharp a climb as he could. Hunched low over the broom, Harry cut through the air like an arrow, letting the wind tear at his robes, his eyes, let it tear the scream of rage from his throat.

He had done everything! Everything they asked. Everything they wanted from him. Was it so much to have this one thing for himself? This ONE DAMNED THING??

So caught up in the feel of the wind and his raging thoughts, Harry almost didn't see the Bludger. The heavy ball zoomed by him as he reached the apex of his flight and made him screech to a stop. His eyes narrowed, and his lips curled in a snarl. No bloody Bludger was going to ruin this bloody day for him. Not now. Not ever.

Instead of avoiding the Bludger -- which he was perfectly capable of, even on this fairly tame broom -- he whipped around sharply, lined himself up, and punched it.

The crunch of bone and flesh and ball was very, very satisfying. As the Bludger fell away, so did Harry, chasing it. He angled his broom to intercept the damnable thing, swarming past, then in front of it, angled just so . . . and then he swung his arm around again and smacked the Bludger into next week.

Take that! "I HATE YOU!" he screamed at the thing as it raced away from him again. "I FUCKING HATE YOU!"

The chase was on, and if he didn't know better, he'd almost think the Bludger was afraid of him. Harry pursued it across the field. Blood

roared in his ears. His breaths came as rasping pants. Somewhere, his arm throbbed, but he ignored it. Instead, he went after the Bludger like it was a rabbit to his hound. Tight turns and wide, steep climbs and shallow drops, speeds of over seventy miles an hour, eighty, ninety, and then almost instantaneous stops. He caught up to the thing again, a grim smile painted on his face, and let it slam into his chest and bounce off, before he smashed it again with his fist.

The Bludger fled, picking up speed, and Harry tore after it. "COME BACK HERE!"

"POTTER!" Flint appeared suddenly in front of him, cutting off his race against the Bludger. "Hit the deck!"

"Go to HELL!" Harry screamed, and tried to move around him. What did it matter anyway? Nothing fucking mattered.

"Get down NOW, Potter, or I swear to Merlin, I will bench you permanently."

He didn't care, he didn't, and he was going to scream something else, like Get the FUCK out of my way! but before he got a chance, Flint surprised him. The Quidditch Captain, astride his broom, gripped the narrow shaft like it was the only thing real left in the world, and his face was pale with . . . fear? "Harry. You're hurt. I don't want to lose my best player, okay? Hit the deck. Please."

It was the please that got him. No one ever said please to Harry Potter, the useless freak and miscreant, the punching bag and easy target. The please made him hesitate. The moment he did, however, the throbbing in his arm became far more noticeable. He glanced at it, saw the purple and bloody forearm, the bone poking through the skin where it was broken. He felt suddenly ill. Trembling, his body coming over all dizzy, he nodded.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Sorry, Captain Flint."

"Just get down, all right? We've got a stretcher for the infirmary already."

Harry just nodded again, and dropped quickly to the ground. His stomach lurched several times on the way down, and he found it hard to breathe. Once his feet hit the dirt, he vomited before dismounting. He vomited hard, violently. Bent over the broom and clutching his broken arm to his chest with his whole one, he puked till he saw stars.

"Come on," he heard someone say, "Get him on the stretcher. Harry, you'll be all right, lad. Come on . . ."

The moment he went horizontal, he passed out.

When Harry woke, it was dark and quiet. It took him a few minutes to remember where he was, and when he did, he groaned softly. Not that he was still hurting much -- though there was an ache in his chest which he chalked up to healing ribs -- but because he had no desire at all to deal with Madam Pomfrey again. She knew too many of his secrets already. And her kindnesses nearly undid him every time he came here.

He couldn't let her get to him.

He had to be strong.

"Mr. Potter," a quiet voice said, one he recognized instantly, and he suppressed another groan, for an entirely different reason. He closed his eyes and tried to pretend he was asleep. Maybe if he was asleep, Snape would go away and leave him alone. Please leave me alone.

"Mr. Potter," Snape said again, and there was a tremor in his voice this time, something Harry had never heard before. "I know you are awake. I would like . . . I want to speak with you."

It was inevitable, wasn't it. Harry steeled himself for the latest dressing down and opened his eyes again. The Professor was perched on a narrow chair just next to his bed, on the left hand side, and with his black robes and black hair, he had blended well enough into the darkness that Harry hadn't seen him at first. Snape's hands were folded in his lap, but the shadows of the night and the man's forehead and curtain of hair hid his eyes. Harry wished he could see

the man's eyes, even though he was pretty sure he knew what he would see in them.

"Yes, sir?" Harry said flatly, too tired to put any feeling into it. If he had to be in the infirmary, he would have liked to just sleep, instead of being lit into again. He just wasn't up for this.

"Potter . . . I would like . . ." Snape ducked his head briefly, and when it came up, he leaned forward, closer to the bed than was comfortable for Harry, and his hands reached for the edge of the bed, to clutch at the blanket there as if he were nervous.

What the hell? "Sir?"

"I want to apologize," Snape said quickly, as if he could only get the words out if he rushed them. His face was even closer now, and Harry's mouth opened in shock as the professor and bane of his existence continued, "I've treated you badly, and I'm sorry."

If his chest didn't hurt so bad, Harry would have laughed.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews and support on this story! In fact, this week, Better Be Slytherin! has been listed as Featured Story at the Potions & Snitches site by readers. Supercoolness.

Alas, I am still engaged in work related program activities at my day job (which is why I am writing on my day off, today), so updates won't be as frequent as I would like, but should still be once a week or so. I hope. Next thing I have to work on is a chappie for Walk the Shadows, though, since I left poor Sev with a coupla Gryffindors in his living room and no chance of egress. Till next time!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 24

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

Severus clearly had some make up work ahead of him. The largest question, of course, was would Potter give him yet another chance?

An hour after Flint left his office found Severus by the Infirmary doors. He had crept inside -- like a common thief, he sneered to himself, or someone with something to hide -- and blended with the shadows in the corner, watching the Slytherin Quidditch team surrounding Harry Potter's bed. Some of them sat on chairs or other beds nearby, and the rest stood. Severus could not see the injured boy from here, but from the worried looks of the other boys, he could imagine what Potter looked like.

Draco Malfoy, surprisingly, was sitting on Potter's bed. His blond hair -- usually perfectly coifed with not a strand out of place -- was severely disheveled, and he looked as worried as the rest of the team.

Severus continued to watch from the shadows as the team was ushered out not long later, by Madam Pomfrey, who told them sternly that "Potter needs his rest, not a gaggle of gawking geese."

There were times Severus truly appreciated the Medi-witch.

Malfoy, however, lingered for a few minutes after the others left, and bent his face close to Potter, who Severus could now see for the lack of bodies blocking his view. The boy appeared asleep, but Draco was apparently speaking to him anyway. Severus inched closer, to listen.

"...why he would say something like that. I wouldn't have, you know." Malfoy pushed his hair out of his eyes and shook his head. "I know

you're better, faster, even on a junky old broom." The boy's voice dropped to a whisper, and Severus had to strain to hear him. "Just . . . I hope you'll be all right, Harry. We . . . I was really sc . . . I mean, concerned for you. We all were."

Madam Pomfrey was back, and as Severus retreated to his shadows again, she shooed the boy out – wondering out loud how he had managed to remain behind the first time.

When she returned again, she pierced Severus with a gaze, letting him know that she knew he was there, and that she had words for him. Serious ones.

He sighed and moved forward. "I know," he said softly.

"You know nothing," she hissed. "The boy is exhausted. And the nutritive potions have ceased working for him since they have nothing to base from." At his frown, she continued, still sounding like a wet cat, "He has not been eating properly. Nor sleeping. I thought we had discussed this. The importance of getting him healthy."

"We did," he admitted.

"Then explain his condition to me."

He couldn't, and both of them knew it. So he did not try.

Madam Pomfrey nodded slowly. "I hope you come up with a better story when you talk to the boy."

Severus hoped so, too.

When she continued, her voice was crisp, but still low. "He broke three ribs; they will be sore for some days, and I do not want to hear any nonsense about him doing any detentions during that time. He needs to rest."

She paused, waiting, and Severus nodded, as he was meant to.

“And his right arm was shattered. Compound fracture that he exacerbated by striking a bludger with it. Several times.” She paused again, and waited until Severus met her gaze. It seemed harder to do than it had been before. Her voice dropped again. “Something drove him to a fit of rage, which he saw fit to take out on himself.”

“On a bludger,” he corrected.

Her eyes narrowed. “As if the bludger felt it. Make no mistake, Professor Snape, Mr. Potter had every intention of taking those injuries.” Severus felt his insides knot up. Had it gotten so bad for the boy? Of course it had, he chastised himself. And he knew it. Pomfrey sighed, and Severus held his breath, waiting for the worst. “I looked him over again, for any other signs of self-harm, scars from cutting or burns or the like. I found none. The behavior does not appear to be habitual.”

Severus let out his breath. There was that, at least.

“Which is not to say it has not been,” she continued, relentless. “He is a wizard, after all, and he had hidden the signs of his abuse at home fairly well.”

He had at that. “Surely you don’t think—”

“I don’t know what to think,” she said honestly. “I thought you and I had come to an understanding about young Mr. Potter. I thought I could count on you not to mistake him for someone else. And I thought you would care more for a member of your House than you did old grudges.” She stared him in the eyes, and he looked away again. He was a fool, and a coward, that he could not even own up to his errors, that he could not face the one woman who had always had faith in him. “Apparently I thought wrong.”

“No,” he said softly, and made himself look at her again. Let no one call him coward. “No, I . . . I will do right by him.”

“You had better, Severus Snape. I do not want him coming back in here like this again. Ever. Is that clear?”

“Of course,” he said stiffly. He had said he would do right by the boy, and so he would. She had never had cause to doubt his word before. Of course, he had never let her down so horribly before either.

She gave him a curt nod, then said, “I also noted his scar was inflamed again, and applied some salve. His bones are repaired, but he will need to favor them for a week or two, the arm especially. I don’t want him flying again until at least then, and preferably not until I give him the go ahead.”

Unspoken was the understanding that the boy might not be completely trusted in the air, with bludgers flying about, just now. Severus nodded. “I will see to it.”

“Good. He’s sleeping now, if you want to see him.”

Since had come out of the dungeons to do that very thing, Severus was not too put off by her assumption that he should. Instead, he nodded, and went to stand at the boy’s bedside. Potter looked so small in the hospital bed, so pale and frail against the white sheets. His right arm – the damaged one – was held in a soft sling, to keep him from jostling it too much. The lightning bolt scar stood out like a slash on his nearly white forehead. His mouth was pinched, even in sleep, as if he were still in pain. But Pomfrey would have dosed him with pain relief potions, surely.

He glanced at her, and she nodded. “I gave him a strong one, and a muscle relaxant, but he seems unable to rest well even so. If he wakes before midnight, I have a Dreamless Sleep for him, too.”

Severus nodded, and pulled a chair up, one left there by the Quidditch team. As he eased himself down, he wondered how it had come to this. Alas, he knew the answer; he just did not want to admit it. And yet he must.

It was fairly close to midnight before Potter woke. As with almost everything the boy did, he woke quietly, eyes blinking heavily as confusion crossed his face. Severus could tell when Potter realized he was in the Infirmary, as he gave a low sigh, almost a groan, of displeasure. If he had not been trying desperately to figure out what

he was going to say to the Boy Who Tried to Beat Bludgers at Their Game, he might have found it amusing.

As it was, he had only to say, "Mr. Potter," and the boy closed his eyes again with another almost inaudible groan. His expression grew immediately blank, as Potter hid his emotions carefully behind his mask. Severus could not blame him, at all.

The words he knew he had to say made his voice shake, just a little, when he repeated, "Mr. Potter." He swallowed, then, "I know you are awake. I would like . . . I want to speak with you."

The resigned look in the boy's eyes when he opened them again and sought out the form of his professor was so complete, Severus was almost knocked back. He didn't have to be a Legilimens to realize Potter expected a lecture, and maybe some punishment. Well, the boy was in for a surprise then.

"Yes, sir?" Potter's voice was flat, with almost no inflection, and Severus hesitated and swallowed again.

"Potter . . . I would like . . ." Severus ducked his head briefly, and when it came up, he leaned forward, closer to the bed and reached for the edge of the bed, to clutch at the blanket. He needed something to hold, something to grip, or he was never going to get through this.

"Sir?"

"I want to apologize," Severus said quickly, only able to get the words out if he rushed them. Potter's mouth opened as wide as his eyes as he continued, "I've treated you badly, and I'm sorry."

A long moment passed, with Potter staring at him like he had suddenly turned into a flobberworm. His eyes narrowed after the first few seconds, as suspicion took root in his mien. Severus was almost glad to see it, as it meant the Potter Brat wasn't going to just accept his words on face value. And yet . . . he had to accept them. Severus would not accept anything else. He was going to make a concerted

effort to treat the boy as he would any of his other Snakes; he was going to change.

At last, Potter said, "Fine. Thanks," and turned his face away.

He should have just gone, and waited for another time, but he could not dispel the feeling that this was all his fault, and he wanted . . . absolution? Something, some recognition or acknowledgement of what this was costing him. So he said, "Potter, I know you're tired, and I understand this has been a difficult week for you," and when the boy's jaw clenched, he should have taken it as a sign and left him alone, but hindsight was twenty-twenty, wasn't it? "I am willing to take some of the responsibility for that, and—"

"Oh, you are?" the boy snapped. His green eyes flashed dangerously. "How incredibly noble of you. Sir."

Severus clenched his hands into fists. "Well, it is hardly my doing that your scar has been hurting and you've not seen fit to share that information with me."

"Oh, right; you've been so bloody approachable!"

"Language, Mr. Potter! And I will not tolerate your impertinence."

Potter worked his jaw and came out with a sullen, "Sorry, sir."

Severus gave a quick nod. He was just as glad for the display of temper, actually, as, in his opinion, it showed the boy would likely make a recovery from this . . . incident, without too much trauma. "As I was saying, since your present predicament is, at least in some respects, my responsibility, and I have heard from others of your professors that you have fallen behind in your work—"

"Because you made me do—" Potter cut off when Severus raised a warning hand, though the accompanying flinch he could have done without. He had never struck a child in his life, but Potter's reaction gave him a start nonetheless, and reminded him that this was a child he had to handle carefully, or he would never regain the boy's trust . . . if he had ever had it in the first place.

"I understand that," Severus said, more softly, dropping his hand. The boy's gaze tracked it, all the way down, which made him feel an even greater beast for raising it in the first place. "I am merely telling you what I have come to realize very recently. And to follow that up with an offer for tutoring. To help you catch up with your classmates."

"No. Thank you. Sir." The boy's expression was set in stone. "I'm doing fine by myself."

Severus stared at the small form in the bed and suppressed a sigh. How many times had this child said – or internalized – that same thing over the course of his life? How many times had others made him feel like he had to get along by himself, that he had no one else to rely on? He had been severely neglected by his relatives, that was certain, and seemingly had not been given any refuge at school either. Severus did not care to ponder that particular issue any longer for the moment, but he had to set the boy straight.

"I was not actually giving you a choice," Severus told him.

Potter's eyes blazed again, though the rest of his face was as blank as a new canvas. That was his weakness, Severus realized. The boy could not lie with his eyes to save his life. His voice came out rather strangled as he said, "Fine, sir." Then he drew a deep breath and swallowed, looking away again. "Can you . . . can you go now? I'm really tired."

"Very well," Severus said and got to his feet. But he had to get in a parting word. "Madam Pomfrey has informed me that the nutritive potion you have been taking will do you no good without actual food to drive it along. Assuming she allows you to leave the infirmary in the morning, I will expect to see you at all meals tomorrow, and each day thereafter. And after dinner, starting tomorrow, we shall begin catching you up."

"Yes, sir," came the quiet reply, and Severus took his leave.

Madam Pomfrey did not, indeed, let Potter leave the infirmary the next day, insisting he needed another day of full bed rest. Severus

did not see the need to speak with Potter again during the day, but he did advise Flint to make sure one of the other Firsties got his assignments to him and several of his books as well. He rather thought the boy would appreciate something to do. As well, it would make it easier when Severus began their tutoring session after dinner. He did not mean to put that off any longer than necessary.

He would have thought Potter understood that, and so it with some consternation that he met the boy's annoyed, "What now? Sir?" when he arrived at the infirmary at just half six.

"We are beginning our tutoring," Severus said with much more calm than he felt, and choosing to ignore the snappishness in Potter's tone. "You seem to be most behind in History of Magic, thus we will focus on that subject this evening."

Potter glared at him for one long minute, then let out a deep sigh and said, "Yes, sir."

When it seemed the boy was just going to sit there, Severus said, "Would you not prefer to take notes?"

With a quick glance at his right arm, which was still in a sling, Potter said, "No, sir, that's all right."

Oh, for pity's sake. "Have you never heard of a dictaquill?"

Potter frowned. "No . . . should I?"

No, Severus thought, he probably hadn't. Not living with those Muggles, at any rate. As patiently as he could, he said, "A dictaquill will take notes for you; they are not generally allowed at Hogwarts except for under circumstances where the student is unable to take notes on their own. Madam Pomfrey should have several specimens, just for this purpose."

"Oh."

"Shall I see if she has one?"

Potter squinted at him. "Please."

Severus tracked down the Medi-witch, and the quill in question, and returned to the boy, who was pressing his palm to his head. When he caught sight of Severus again, Potter's hand dropped from his forehead as if it had been burned.

"Your scar is hurting again."

"No, not really."

"Do not lie to me!" Potter flinched back, pressing himself against the headboard, and Severus modulated his tone, though he crossed his arms over his chest in his own defensive maneuver. "It is idiotic, not to mention completely unconscionable for you to try and hide this situation. If your scar is indeed a link to the Dark Lord, then you need to advise me whenever you have the slightest sensation in it. Do you understand?"

"I . . . Yes, sir. Of course."

"I don't think you do. This is your life we're talking about here. Or have you forgotten what happened the last time you were attacked?"

"I haven't! I just . . . it's . . . well, my scar hurts almost all the time, sir, and I doubt you want me running to you every five minutes whining about it."

That stopped Severus for a moment. It was true; he didn't want the boy whining to him constantly. But at the same time, he wanted to know when the scar was "active." After a short pause, he said, "Does it always hurt the same way?"

Potter's eyes narrowed, and then he shook his head. "Sometimes it just aches."

"And sometimes, it does not?"

An almost wry smile touched the boy's lips. "No. Sometimes it burns."

With a slow nod, Severus asked, "Have you noted a pattern as to when that occurs?"

"Not really," Potter admitted. "Though it seems to happen more at night. Usually after . . . er, I mean, if I wake up at night."

"After a nightmare?"

Surprisingly, the boy's face flushed, and he shrugged up one shoulder, as if that were an answer. Why should he be embarrassed about nightmares?

"What are your nightmares about?" he asked.

"Doesn't matter," the boy mumbled.

"I shall be the judge of that." Severus sat in the chair by the bed again, and placed the dictaquill on the night table. "Tell me."

Potter glared at him for another minute before he sighed again. "Sometimes, it's just a green light, and someone screaming." Severus caught his breath, and hoped Potter had not noticed. How could he remember – or dream – about something like that? "But lately it's been more . . . awful."

"Explain."

Potter chewed on his lower lip, and Severus saw him clenching and unclenching his fists. "Er, it's hard to explain. There's always blood, but not always red. Sometimes, it's silver, and there's . . . I dunno, a weird light, and the smell of dead things."

Severus processed that briefly. "And it is after these dreams that your scar hurts worst?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you see anything, or feel anything besides this aching, when you are awake and your scar gives you pain?"

"No, sir." Potter glanced at the dictaquil. "Can we study now?"

Giving him a long look, Severus nodded. "But I want to hear about these dreams, the very next time you see me after you have one, Potter. And you will alert me if anything changes in the way your scar feels or reacts. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. You have parchment ready? Good. As a favor to me, Professor Binns has agreed to allow you a make up essay for the abysmal effort you put forth at the end of last week. Thus, you may open your text to Chapter Three, which discusses the Witch burnings of the 14th century, specifically that of Wendelin the Weird. Now. How much of this chapter have you already read?"

"I read it all," the boy said. "Sir."

"Mm. Let's see if you retained anything. Tell me, what were several of the ways in which Muggles attempted to identify Witches at that time? Which of these were true signs of a witch, and which were not?"

Potter sighed a bit, and then tried to answer, and then had to page through the chapter to help himself out. His ears and neck were red with embarrassment by the time it got that far.

"Just read the chapter, Potter," Severus snapped. "And stop wasting my time."

"You don't have to be here," Potter snapped back. "I told you I was fine on my own!"

"This is not negotiable," Severus told him, sneering. "I will assist you in getting your studies back on track. What did you do all day today? Did you not have any time for studying?"

The red traveled to Potter's face and he ducked his head, mumbling something.

"Speak up, boy!"

"I was sleeping, all right?" The boy's head came up quickly, and there was an odd shine in his eyes. Severus dearly hoped there were not going to be tears; he had very little tolerance for tears. But the boy put his chin up a bit and merely said, "I was really tired, and I was sleeping. Most of the day."

Out of the corner of his eye, Severus caught sight of Poppy sticking her head out the door of her office and giving him a baleful glare. He sighed and modulated his tone again. She was right, and he knew it. "My . . . apologies, Mr. Potter. Please, read this chapter now, and we'll go over the information you need for your essay when you are finished. That is . . . if you are rested enough."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Something in Potter's tone made Severus say, "Whatever for?"

"For sleeping when I should have been working. I know that's wrong, sir. I'm awful sorry."

"No. No, Mr. Potter. Disregard what I said earlier. You should have been resting, on Madam Pomfrey's orders if nothing else. And, at your age, you definitely need more sleep than you have been getting of late. And with nightmares on top of it . . . it's no wonder you've become exhausted."

Potter frowned a little, and Severus sighed – he seemed to be doing an awful lot of that lately – and continued, "The blame for that can be laid squarely on my shoulders, I'm afraid. Not yours. I did not realize how much of your time I was monopolizing. Or, I knew, but I chose not to let it influence my decision. I wanted to keep you in my sights, to keep you from being injured again. Unfortunately, the method I selected did not end up aiding you in the long run."

"Yeah," Potter agreed quietly, staring at his hands for a moment before turning his bright green gaze on his professor. There was an oddly speculative look in his eyes, and he did not appear so angry now. Perhaps honesty worked best with this boy. Severus would not, however, admit to being worried about him. "I mean, yes, sir."

“Let that not deter us now, all right?” Severus said. “Read the chapter, if you will, and let me know when you are finished.”

Potter nodded and opened his book. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

As Severus took a book of his own from one of the pockets of his voluminous robes, and settled back in his chair, he mused that there might be hope for him and the son of James Potter getting along after all.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful reviews and support on this story!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 25

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

As Severus took a book of his own from one of the pockets of his voluminous robes, and settled back in his chair, he mused that there might be hope for him and the son of James Potter getting along after all.

Harry Potter absolutely loathed the Infirmary. He had disliked it before, but after his most recent stay, when Madam Pomfrey clucked over him like a mother hen and made him sleep and eat and take foul potions, when there was nothing really wrong with him, once his broken arm was fixed . . . he decided he never wanted to go in there again. He was not accustomed to having people hover over him, or feel his forehead every few minutes, or ask him how he was doing every half hour, and it was suffocating.

It might have been nice if he was five years old . . . in fact, when he had been five, he would have appreciated the attention, since he had never gotten any from his aunt and uncle, no matter how ill or injured he was. But at more than eleven years, he was not a baby to be coddled, and he did not like it at all. It made him feel young, and stupid, and he always had a running voice in his head telling him he wasn't worth anyone's attention anyway.

Thus, it was a great relief when he was finally released from Madam Pomfrey's care after two full days of bed rest. His arm was healed, though she told him to take it easy, not to do any heavy lifting, and that he wasn't to play Quidditch or even fly, until he was given her permission. Patches of black, blue, yellow and green skin littered his arm, and he was vaguely impressed by the job he'd done on it,

though he'd never say so. His ribs were still a bit tender, but at least it didn't hurt to breathe anymore.

When Madam Pomfrey told him he could go at last, he thanked her quickly, shoved the few gifts he'd been given – including another unsigned box of Chocolate Frogs – into his bag, and lit out of her domain without looking back.

The next few days were crammed with classes, restless nights, and frequent lectures from Flint about Quidditch safety and the necessity of using a bat when engaging the Bludger. Each evening he had a tutoring session with Professor Snape directly after dinner. The sessions did not last as long as the detentions had previously, only two hours or so, instead of four to five. And afterwards, Harry had time to hang out with his friends, and was even able to spend time with his own study group so he could keep up with current material.

Though it felt odd to have all this extra time, oddest of all was during the sessions, when Snape had been . . . not evil. Not even mean. Or, not very mean anyway. He actually explained things that Harry didn't understand in his readings, and went over problems he was having in his essays with a patience Harry never would have thought the man possessed.

He could not, for the life of him, figure the professor out. But he was very glad things had settled down a bit.

On the Monday after his release from the Infirmary, Harry and Teddy were in the Library. On the table in front of them was the new box of chocolates. They were testing the anonymous gift with some of the same spells as they'd used on the first one, to see if this one had been tampered with – no sense in taking chances – when Teddy said, “I saw Professor Snape watching you at lunch today. He wasn't snarling.”

Harry snickered. “Weird, huh? I figure he must have been hit with Confundus or something.”

“No doubt.” Teddy cast one of the easier Revealing charms, to no effect, then looked at Harry askance. “Draco said he even came to see you in the Infirmary.”

“Draco’s got a big mouth.”

Teddy grinned. “Yeah. But he knows stuff, too.”

“What kind of stuff?”

With a shrug, Teddy pointed at the next spell in the book, and Harry spent a few moments trying out the wand motions, before he cast the charm at the box of Frogs. Nothing.

“What kind of stuff?” Harry asked again.

“About the professor. And your father.”

Harry gaped at him. “What about my father?” He recalled what the Bloody Baron had told, about how Snape had not got along with James Potter, and that this was one of the reasons he might have had for treating Harry so shabbily. But the Baron had not been willing to elaborate. In fact, Harry had not seen very much of the Baron the last few days, although he always seemed to be there when Harry was alone . . . like he was guarding him or something.

It was sort of disconcerting.

But even more so was that Draco – and apparently Teddy – knew things about James Potter that Harry didn’t. Of course, almost everyone did, really. All Harry knew was that his father had played Quidditch.

“They, um, didn’t get along at school,” Teddy said.

“I know that.” The Bloody Baron had told him as much.

“Yeah.” Teddy cast another spell, which made the box glow red for a brief second, but that was the intended effect, so there was still nothing wrong with the sweets. “But I mean they really didn’t get on.

Your father was in a gang of sorts, with a couple other blokes. They called themselves The Marauders.”

“The Marauders?” Such a nickname sounded like something Dudley’s crew would have come up with, and the comparison gave Harry a very uneasy feeling.

Teddy nodded, and pointed out the next spell, which Harry took his turn to cast. Nothing. Then Teddy said, “Apparently The Marauders didn’t like Slytherins very much; they were all in Gryffindor.”

Harry nodded. He’d known his father was, at least, as he’d played Quidditch for the Gryffindor team. “Who were the others?”

“I don’t know all their names, but Sirius Black was one of them.”

“Sirius Black?” The name sounded almost familiar, and then he remembered a conversation with Draco a few days ago about family trees and all that rot, which were apparently very important for purebloods like the Malfoys. “Isn’t Black—”

“He was a cousin to Draco’s Mum, yeah. The only Black to be in Gryffindor in like a hundred years or something.”

Harry grimaced. “Like I’m the only Potter in Slytherin in pretty much ever.”

Teddy gave him a sideways look and cast the next spell. Nothing. “Yeah, like that.”

“So, they didn’t like Slytherins,” Harry prompted, not wanting to think any more about how much a freak he was, simply for the way he’d been sorted. He liked his House. Most of the time.

Teddy spoke slowly, as if unsure how what he said would be taken. “Well, see, they liked Snape least of all. I guess they were awful to him. Went after him all the time, four against one.”

Stunned, Harry could only stare again. He thought Gryffindors were supposed to be brave, but ganging up on someone like that was

about the furthest thing from brave as he could imagine. The sinking feeling in his gut intensified. Had his father really been just a bully, like Dudley? It was possible, he supposed. Hadn't Uncle Vernon said over and over what a horrible person he'd been? Maybe he was speaking from experience. Maybe . . . maybe that's why they treated Harry so badly. He let out a low whistle. "No wonder Snape hates me."

"I don't think he does, though. Not anymore."

"I think he's just better at hiding it."

Teddy shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe he's finally taking Rule One to heart."

Harry considered that possibility while he cast the last of their attempts to check the sweets box for curses. It was clean. "Yeah. Maybe."

"Looks like you got yourself another normal box of chocolates, Harry." Teddy almost sounded disappointed, like it would have been more interesting if there had been a curse on the box.

Harry had to agree that it would have, but such a result would not have been as tasty. "Looks like. Want some?"

With a snicker, Teddy said, "Why, 'cause Draco's not here?"

Harry laughed. "No, I'll try one, too. See?" He opened the box as if expecting it to explode, and when it didn't, he flipped out two Frogs, one for himself, and one for Teddy. "Here goes nothing!" and he ripped open the package and bit the head off the Frog in quick succession.

Teddy laughed again and opened his own Frog. "You're mad."

"As a hatter," Harry agreed around a mouthful of chocolate.

"We should try and figure out who's been leaving these for you. You may have a secret admirer. Some Hufflepuff girl, probably."

“Oh, thanks,” Harry replied with a laugh and punched Teddy in the shoulder.

“No, seriously. Who wouldn’t want to curry favor with the Boy Who Lived?”

Harry scowled. He hated that nickname, since all it meant was that his parents had died instead of him. “Cut it out, Teddy. I mean it.”

Teddy held up his hands. “I’m just saying. It’s probably from a girl. Like I told you, no self-respecting boy is going to give you candy.”

“Okay, fine. How do we tell which girl, then?”

Giving Harry another sly look, Teddy drawled, “We could make an announcement in the Great Hall . . .”

“Teddy!”

“Kidding! But there are ways to figure out who last handled something. You know, before you picked it up.”

“What, like fingerprints?”

“Finger what?”

Harry lifted both eyebrows in surprise. “Fingerprints . . . Erm. Probably just a Muggle thing.”

“Oh, right. I forget sometimes.”

Harry grimaced again. “I seem so normal, right?”

Teddy’s expression turned rueful. “Yeah, kind of. Sorry, Harry, but I’ve never really met any Muggles before. I’ve been doing some reading, and often times, a person with limited or no exposure to a different . . . culture can get stuck in all sorts of preconceived notions, which may or may not be accurate. And they can awfully difficult to overcome, too.”

Harry rolled his eyes. Teddy was like no one he had ever met. “Whatever. So, how would you figure out who held the box last?”

“Magical signature.” At Harry’s blank look, he continued, “Everyone’s magic is a little bit different, which is why everyone’s wands are a bit different, too. With the right spell, you can figure out the signature of the one who held the box last because there’ll be a remnant of their magic on the box.”

“Will the . . . remnant give you their name?”

Teddy shook his head. “No, but you’ll be able to compare it to the signature of people who it might be, to see if it matches.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “So . . . I’d need to go ‘round to all the girls in school and see if any of them has the same magical signature as what’s on the box?”

“Well, yeah.”

“It might be faster to make that announcement. Less likely to get me hexed, too.”

Snorting a laugh, Teddy admitted it was a long shot. “There are other things we can try, though. It would take a bit of research . . .”

“Aw, admit it, Teddy, you just like spending time in the library.”

“Okay, fine! But it does have far more books than my father’s, and on so many different topics. It’s amazing, really. And the section on counter-curses is just—”

“Amazing. I know.”

“Prat.”

“Bookworm.”

“Quidditch Bat.”

Harry laughed. "At least I'm not a snitch."

Grinning, Teddy said, "True enough." He cast a quick Tempus and sighed then started picking up the table. "We have Herbology in twenty minutes."

"Don't you like playing with plants?" Harry asked as he collected several books and reshelfed them.

"I'd rather play with Potions."

"Yeah, me, too." When Teddy turned to him, looking surprised, Harry added, "Well, it's an interesting class when Snape isn't calling me names and stuff. And I finally understand about adjusting the acidity of the base, depending on what the first ingredient you add next is, so I might do well in the next practical. He explained it to me last night."

"Good deal," Teddy said.

"Yeah. He's really been, I don't know, different with me. Since . . . you know."

"Since you almost killed yourself on the pitch."

"I didn't!"

"You almost did."

"I wasn't trying to!"

"I know." They finished putting the books away before Teddy steered them quickly out of the library. Harry was getting louder and having a harder time holding his temper, and Madam Pince was glaring at them from her desk. "But all the same, you could've died."

Silently fuming, Harry shrugged up one shoulder. He hadn't really thought of it that way. But he supposed Teddy was right. He never wanted to lose himself like that again, and if maybe Snape wouldn't assign him a gajillion detentions for no reason, he probably wouldn't.

It had been . . . frightening, that red haze of rage, the feel of the Bludger crushing his arm, the rawness of his screams . . .

Teddy was giving him another odd look, and Harry pushed memories of his near-breakdown away. “Wonder what we’ll plant today,” he said to change the subject.

“Probably something with thorns,” Teddy griped.

“Or mucus.”

“Or teeth.”

Harry laughed and they went out to the greenhouses together.

It was two more days before Harry got the go ahead from Madam Pomfrey to fly again, and he could not wait to get out on the pitch. She told him her ban was lifted during his morning check-in, which was just after breakfast on the day of his next Quidditch practice. He was so excited, he could barely sit through morning classes. At lunch, he was bouncing in his seat.

“Ants in your pants, Harry?” Millicent teased.

He shook his head and swallowed his bite of sandwich. “Going flying today.”

“But you’ll stay out of the hospital wing, yeah?” asked Draco, smirking.

“Certainly hope so,” Harry said, grinning back. “But you never know. Rogue Bludgers. They’re everywhere.”

His friends laughed, and the bunch of them carried on in like vein for a few more minutes before Draco looked up, surprised. “Owl alert,” he called, and everyone covered their dishes. One of the second year Slytherins had an owl with . . . incontinence issues, and they never knew when the bloody thing was going to visit. “Safe,” Draco told them a minute later. “No Icarus. But there is a package coming. . . .”

Harry peered up, along with everyone else at their end of the table, in time to see six large screech owls dipping down towards him, carrying a long, thin package between them.

“Heads up, Harry!” Millicent called, and Harry jumped from his seat and stretched up, just as the owls let go of their delivery. The package dropped like a stone, and Harry snatched it out of the air. A final owl zoomed past his head, dropping an envelope with the words, “OPEN THIS FIRST” scrawled on the front in a very recognizable script.

“Owl post at lunch,” Teddy said. “Wonder who it’s from.”

“My secret admirer, maybe,” Harry muttered, and Teddy laughed.

“They’re getting bold, then.”

But it wasn’t from a secret admirer. In fact, when Harry opened the envelope and took out a card, he had to read it through three times before he could believe the words.

“What’s it say?” Teddy asked. “Is it a clue?”

“It’s from Professor Snape,” Harry whispered. He yanked a bit of the butcher paper off the top of the package, exposing just the end of a broomstick.

“Let me see,” Millie said, and grabbed at the card, so she could read it aloud, in a stage whisper. “‘DO NOT OPEN parcel at the table, or everyone will want one, and I am not running a charitable organization here. However, Slytherin’s Seeker does need a decent broom.’ And it’s signed ‘Professor S. Snape.’ Merlin’s drawers!” Millie gaped at Harry. “The professor sent you—”

“A Nimbus 2000.” Harry’s voice was low and reverent as he smoothed a hand over the handle of the new broom, all he allowed himself to open of the parcel until he could be alone. “I can’t believe it.”

Teddy smirked, and kept his voice down, too. "Well, he wants us to win, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, but . . ." Harry glanced up at the Head Table, just in time to see the professor turn his head away. A tinge of red infused the normally sallow cheeks. If Harry didn't know better, he would think Snape was embarrassed. For that matter, Harry was embarrassed, and he could feel his ears getting red. He had never received a gift for no reason before. And the only ones he'd gotten for cause was Hedwig, for his birthday, and some candy, for getting laid up in the Infirmary.

But what a gift this was!

Why would Snape give him a new broom? he wondered. Was it really just 'cause he wanted Slytherin to win the Quidditch Cup? Or was this another way of making up for being such a git before, to Harry? Whatever the reason, Harry was even more excited to fly again.

He wanted to try out his new broom right now.

Alas . . . Teddy gave him a commiserating look, and said, "We've got Charms, Harry. In ten minutes."

Harry sighed. "Just enough time to run this back to the dungeons, I guess."

"Don't worry. You have practice tonight, right?"

"Yeah!" Harry perked right up. "Flint'll prob'ly wet himself, he'll be so happy!" He glanced at the Head table again, and this time caught the Professor's gaze. "Thanks," he mouthed, and smiled.

The Professor gave a curt nod, then rose from the table, gathered his dark robes around him, and billowed out of the room without looking back.

Harry watched him, bemused, but didn't think any more about the professor's motives then, not even that evening at practice, when he swooped and dove and flew like he was on fire. The broom was

smooth, and fast, and perfect, and Harry had never felt better in his life.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, readers and reviewers and those who are both, for your wonderful support on this story! Here on ff dot net, there are over a thousand people getting an alert for each new chapter . . . it's amazing! And wonderful! And supakew! You guys are the best. Yep, each of you is the best. I think it involves time travel somehow. Or bunnies.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 26

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

Previously:

As Severus took a book of his own from one of the pockets of his voluminous robes, and settled back in his chair, he mused that there might be hope for him and the son of James Potter getting along after all.

To his utter amazement over the next several weeks, Severus was, indeed, able to “get along” with Harry Potter, the Brat Who Continued to Surprise Him. During their nightly tutoring sessions, the boy was respectful and diligent about his school work, and Severus found himself grudgingly accepting once and for all that his preconceived notions about young Potter had been unjustified, and horrifically skewed. It was a discussion the two of them had almost a week after he gave the Brat the Nimbus that truly solidified things for him, though.

Potter had been hunched over an essay for Herbology for the better part of an hour, not looking up from his books or paper at all, as usual, while Severus corrected Fifth Year exams. The two of them generally spent two hours in Severus' classroom – or occasionally his office – each night, the first in independent work, and the second with Severus quizzing the boy on his readings or answering questions, usually about schoolwork, but sometimes they spoke about his nightmares or the attack of several weeks ago.

Severus found the schedule rather conducive to getting his work done, and to keeping an eye on the boy. Other than those two hours, Potter was generally with some of the other Firsties in their common room, or at Quidditch practice, which had been expanded to thrice a week. Potter was rarely, if ever, alone, and thus less likely to be attacked again.

This particular night, Severus was especially glad of the quiet, since the Fifth Years had been particularly dense on their exams, and he knew he would have his work cut out for him to get them ready for OWLS. But he still looked up inquiringly when Potter said, "Sir?"

Severus raised an eyebrow, and Potter bit his lip then looked down at his desk. Severus waited; he had an infinite amount of experience waiting. Finally, the boy looked back at him. "Sir, you said before that you meet with the, um, the families of all the First Years."

It didn't sound like a question, and so Severus did not answer it except to briefly incline his head. As he had discovered over the last couple weeks, Potter would get to his point soon enough, if he was given enough time, and little pressure to perform. But he thought he saw where this was going, and he wasn't sure what he would do at that time.

Another minute passed, and Potter drew a deep breath, and gazed at his hands. "Did you see the Dursleys yet?"

"I did."

Potter's head shot up. "Did they . . . were they awful, sir?"

Severus considered what to say. The visit had been awful. It would have been even if he had not Legilimized the Muggles and been inundated by memories of their loathsome treatment of the boy in front of him. But he did not want Potter to feel worse for all that. Severus did not want him to be humiliated, as he knew he would have been in Potter's shoes, by his dirty laundry being aired by a professor. And what a revelation that was! Finally, however, all he said was, "It was not pleasant."

A corner of Potter's mouth twitched up. "Yeah, they're not real pleasant people."

"No," Severus agreed. They had not discussed Potter's home life before, except in very oblique terms, but Severus had known it only a matter of time before they did, as all his Snakes from less than

perfect homes would, eventually, when given the opportunity to do so. He was, frankly, surprised that the boy was opening up this quickly. He debated with himself for a few more moments on how to open the topic further, and then, "They truly tried to pretend you did not exist, for ten years."

Potter nodded, his gaze back on his hands, where he twirled a thin quill between his fingers. Over the last two weeks, Severus had seen a marked improvement in the boy's penmanship, once he learned the correct way to handle his writing tools. Just as his behavior, once he understood the reasoning behind various rules, had improved, too. "Yes, sir. That way they could pretend magic didn't exist either. I never knew why I wasn't allowed to even say the word 'magic' until after I met Hagrid and he told me I was a wizard. It was weird, really."

"I imagine." And Severus could, in a way. There were many things about Potter that he did not understand. He could not fathom how the boy could have been shunted aside and neglected so continuously in his life, and still been able to make friends among his classmates so easily. And he did not understand why, exactly, Potter was giving him a second – or third? – chance to be the Head of House he was meant to be, when the boy obviously had no reason in the world to trust the word of adults.

But he could well understand the . . . disdain many Muggle relatives had for magic when they were confronted with the fact of their Wizarding children, or (as in Potter's case) their wards. At any rate, he could remember the revulsion his own father had for him. He had seen that same disgust in the eyes of the Dursley couple, and their son, as they "discussed" their nephew. He wondered again how Potter had survived ten years of living with them, with no one to mitigate their utterly unconscionable behavior.

"Do you . . ." The boy swallowed, then seemed to gather his courage from somewhere and looked him in the eye. Severus did not blink, just waited, his expression blank. "Do you think they hated me just for the magic, Professor? Or . . ." Another lip gnaw, and then Potter's voice was much softer when he continued, as if he was actually afraid of what he was saying. Afraid of Severus' reaction. "Or maybe 'cause my father was a bully?"

The breath froze in Severus' chest. For several long, agonizing moments, he was sure he would never breathe again. Severus clenched his hand into a fist and heard the quill he had been using on the exams snap in half. The ends dug into his skin. Potter's eyes had widened, a spark of terror barely concealed in their depths.

"Where did you get that idea?" Severus asked in a low, dangerous voice.

Potter flinched at his tone, but answered his question regardless. "Um, some-someone t-told me he w-was in a gang, sir, like my cousin D-dudley has. And that he used to p-pick on p-people, Slytherins mostly, they said, and, and I thought may-maybe he did it to them, too. Picked on the Dursleys, I mean. And maybe, um, maybe that's why they . . . why they hated me. 'Cause he was mean to them, too?"

Well. This was unexpected. Potter had apparently chosen the most roundabout way of asking if his own father's bullying was the reason his Head of House had treated him shabbily. Severus slowly uncurled his fist, not surprised to see blood well on his palm when he dropped the broken quill.

Forcing himself to take several breaths before he cursed the boy and threw him out of the classroom for such a breach of decorum, Severus shook his head. He placed his wand carefully on the desk in front of him, as it had somehow appeared in his hand without his thinking about it.

He, Severus, was not that bully, and would not be. He had promises to keep. Once he had his breathing under control, he gave the boy a sharp look. The green eyes -- Lily's eyes -- tracked his every movement, as if he were a snake about to strike. Severus could not blame him.

The cut on his palm stung, so Severus took out a handkerchief and pressed it to the wound to staunch the blood, though there was not much of it anyway. Then he sighed. How had he come to this? Explaining his motives and his mistakes to an eleven year old? The eleven year old son of James Potter, no less, the tormentor of his

youth. And Lily's son, a tiny voice inside reminded him. Yes, and Lily's. He sighed again.

"I cannot pretend to know whether your father's . . . interactions with the Dursleys impacted them negatively with regards to you." Severus passed a hand over his eyes. "It may just be as you said, that they disliked magic enough to dislike its practitioners." His gaze sought Harry's again, and he watched the boy sitting almost unnaturally still, waiting. Severus did not want to say more, but he knew he should.

At last, he continued, "As for . . . others who may have had . . . less than stellar interactions with your father. It is possible those interactions caused a certain amount of . . . resentment towards anyone connected to him."

"Like his son," Harry said quietly, still holding Severus' gaze.

"Just so," Severus replied.

The boy nodded again, and there was no resentment in his green eyes, nothing accusatory in his mien. Just . . . weary acceptance, and perhaps a bit of resignation.

Severus looked away.

"I like the broom very much, sir," Harry said into the quiet that followed.

"You were meant to." When he turned back to the boy, Harry's head was bent over his essay once more, but he could have sworn the boy's shoulders were held less tightly than they had been a mere hour before.

Severus was just finishing up his stack of exams when Harry spoke again. "Sir?"

"Yes, Potter?"

The boy was fiddling with his quill again, and looking nervous. "I have a question about salisyline root, sir, and the best way to harvest it.

Professor Sprout said it's most potent if you harvest the root on Midsummer, but I thought I read in our Potions book that it's best if cut on a full moon. What if the two aren't the same time?"

Severus almost smiled. He managed to refrain. "They rarely are."

Harry's brows drew down. "Well, then, which time is really better?"

"Think about it. Apply that brain of yours, if possible."

Chewing on his lower lip and ignoring Severus' sarcasm -- which had been half-hearted at best, anyway -- the boy did just that, and then said, hesitantly, "Does it depend on what you're going to use it for?"

"Indeed. Now, tell me why."

Another moment's thought, and Harry said, "Well, sir, if you were going to use it in a poultice for boils or a rash, you'd want the salisyline root to be as potent as possible, so you'd want to cut it at Midsummer. But if you're using it in a more delicate potion, like a Sleeping Draught, you'd want something other than sheer potency."

"Such as?" Severus asked, impressed with the boy's logic despite himself.

Gazing at his hands again, Harry said, "Its properties of muscle relaxation? I mean, taking the root at the full moon would make that aspect of it more, uh, viable, so a potion would help the person fall asleep, without accidentally killing them?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

Harry huffed a laugh and glanced up at Severus through the fringe of his hair. "Telling you, sir."

Severus inclined his head slightly. "Then you are correct. Well reasoned, Potter."

And then he saw the boy's smile -- which was radiant and full of gratitude, for something so small as a moment's praise -- and he was

gladdened to have been responsible for its appearance, at least in part. He gestured to the boy's work. "When you have finished your essay, let me look it over."

"Sir?"

"So I may make sure your work is up to par. Your mind seems capable of holding not completely unintelligent thoughts, and I wish to see if such knowledge can be adequately transferred to paper."

The boy still had a stunned expression that showed no signs of fading. "You want to check over my homework?"

"Indeed, Mr. Potter," Severus replied, and his tone turned more acerbic. "Finish your essay. Now."

That smile again, and Severus truly had no knowledge of why it might appear now. But the, "Yes, sir!" that followed on its heels seemed pleased.

Several days later, as mid October approached, Severus was summoned to the Headmaster's Office. Once more, he felt the role of penitent most keenly, and wondered what, exactly, he had done this time. But Albus apparently did not wish to call him on the carpet. Instead, after offering a dish of his ubiquitous sweets, and attempting to engage him in small talk -- both of which Severus refused with varying degrees of pique -- Albus brought up one Harry Potter.

"I have heard from Harry's other professors that his work has improved dramatically in last couple weeks, Severus. Why, even Minerva has professed herself 'amazed' by his turnaround."

"She is easily impressed, no doubt," Severus muttered resentfully. He had far better things to do with his time than discuss this matter. The boy's marks were improved because he had time to study now; there was no great conspiracy to be found.

"I very much do doubt it, my dear boy." Albus turned on his twinkle, full blast, and Severus winced. "But she has also expressed her concern about the reason behind his sudden improvement. Have you

noticed anything . . . odd about his study habits of late? Has he been getting undue assistance from any quarter?"

Severus glared at the Headmaster. He should have expected something like this, but he honestly had not, assuming that the Brat Who Lived would be above such suspicion. He would gladly wring McGonagall's interfering neck for this insult. "Are you suggesting that Harry Potter is cheating? The Savior of the Wizarding World?"

"Of course not, Severus. Of course not." But Albus' expression said otherwise.

Severus sneered. "Then what is your objection to the boy's improvement?"

"I have no objection, certainly. I am merely bringing these concerns to your attention."

"I see." And he did. He knew this discussion would never have happened if Harry had been sorted anywhere but Slytherin. But the children in the House of Snakes was always suspected of malfeasance, even where there was no cause. "If there are no other delusive asseverations you wish to share, perhaps we could discuss Professor Quirrell's unhealthy obsession with Mr. Potter."

Albus had the audacity to wave a hand dismissively. "Have you discovered any evidence that Quirinus was actually involved in the attack on Harry?"

"Only the boy's memory!" Severus growled. "Which we both observed through the Pensieve, if you'll recall."

"And I believe we concluded it was difficult to be sure of the identity of the attacker. The voice was rather distorted, after all."

Hardly believing what he was hearing, Severus clenched his teeth in an attempt to not say something he would likely regret. This is the same nonchalance the Headmaster had expressed when faced with Severus' account of the Dursleys' misuse of the boy. How could Dumbledore treat Harry's life so casually?

Once he finally had his temper under control, Severus said, "What of Harry's nightmares, and the burning in his scar when he comes into contact with that stuttering fool?"

Instead of answer the charges, Albus merely smiled and popped another lemon sherbet in his mouth. Around the sweet, he said, "It's 'Harry' now, is it, Severus?"

Severus' mouth opened and closed several times before he snarled, "I don't see how my form of address has any bearing on this discussion."

"Quite right, my dear boy, quite right. Alas, since we have no firm evidence of wrong doing on the part of Professor Quirrell, we shall just have to wait and see."

Severus jerked a nod, past the point of making objections. It would obviously be solely his responsibility to keep the Brat alive. But then, that responsibility had fallen to him the day the boy had arrived at Hogwarts and been sorted, when the others had washed their hands of him. "Very well," he said in the same dangerous tone that most of his students knew to avoid at all costs, but which seemed to roll off the Headmaster like water off a squid's back. "If that is all?"

"Yes, Severus, that will be all. Thank you for seeing me."

With another sharp nod, Severus spun on his heel and headed for the door. He had opened it and was preparing to step through when Albus issued his parting shot.

"And Severus? Do make sure to keep an eye on the boy's study mates. It would not do for Harry to be less than diligent in his school work."

Not dignifying such a remark with a reply, Severus slammed the door closed, with himself on the other side, and swooped down the revolving stairs like the bat he was often accused of being. In his seething rage, he did not notice who was watching him from the shadows.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you, readers and reviewers and those who are both, for your wonderful support on this story! We've hit two thousand reviews, and that milestone was achieved with a review by Dalou28, yay!

Snapalicious hugs for all!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 27

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Summary: As a first year, Harry is sorted into Slytherin instead of Gryffindor, and no one is more surprised than his new Head of House.

A/N: Two words: Sinus infections suck. Wait, that's three words. Okay, three words: Antibiotics are Da Bomb. Hm, that's four words. Four words: Holidays are a time sink. Er, that was five . . . um, let me come in again . . .

Previously:

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Harry was in the library, working on an essay for Transfiguration, when he figured out the mystery of the chocolate frogs. Teddy and he had researched magical signatures, and then analyzed the two boxes of frogs Harry had received. After they eliminated their own signatures, plus the one or two people who had touched the boxes aside from Harry, they discovered that, yes, there was one signature on both boxes that they could not identify. The boxes were both from the same person.

All that remained was Harry going about and testing the signatures of all the people in Hogwarts who could have sent him the sweets to see if their signature matched the one on the boxes. The incantation to test someone's signature was *Reveleo Quisnam*, and the wand movement was a simple side to side swish. Easy.

But few people in Hogwarts took kindly to have a spell cast at them, even if it didn't hurt them. So Harry had to do it sneaky. That was okay. He was in Slytherin House, after all, and one thing he'd learned over the last month and a half was that Slytherins would take the behind the scenes route to solve a problem instead of hitting it straight on. Straight on, he knew, was usually fraught with danger.

Harry himself had done plenty of sneaky things growing up with the Dursleys. Sneaking food, sneaking out of his cupboard, sneaking to do his homework. He knew better than to oppose their rulings straight on, but he got his tiny revenges. Like when he cut Dudley down with a well placed barb, or "accidentally" trimmed a prized shrub of Aunt Petunia's till it resembled a bowling ball, or "completely unwitting," encouraged a cat in heat into making a nest in Uncle Vernon's company car.

Oh, yes. He could do sneaky.

This time, though, he had only cast the spell on three people -- Teddy, not completely sure the other boy wasn't having him on the whole time, Draco, 'cause, well, he was nearby and vulnerable to having a spell cast on him, and Pansy Parkinson, who seemed to dislike him altogether and it would have been odd if she sent him sweets, but stranger things had happened -- before he discovered who the culprit was.

Hermione Granger, his library study partner.

He was surprised, though he realized he shouldn't have been, really. She was nice and they got on well in the library, despite him being from Slytherin, and the way most Gryffindors treated the Slytherins. When he had been scrounging for every second he could study, she had been helpful when they worked on the same subject at the same time, and she was quiet, like he was. He liked quiet people. Noisy people reminded him too much of the Dursleys. But the quiet . . . he'd had quiet when he was in his cupboard, except when Dudley was being a prat and stomping up and down the stairs. He had treasured the quiet. It was one reason he still liked to study in the library when he could.

Thus, when he discovered the identity of his anonymous gift-giver, that afternoon in mid-October, he smiled shyly at her.

"Mind telling me what spell you just cast at me?" Hermione said, not looking up from her book.

Harry startled, then laughed softly. "Shoulda known you'd catch me. You don't miss a trick."

"Not with magic," she said, and finally lifted her gaze to meet his. Her expression was one of curiosity, not anger, and he nodded.

"Thank you for the sweets," Harry said, instead of answering her question.

"What sweets?" she asked, even as her cheeks turned as red as her Gryffindor tie.

"The chocolate frogs you sent me when I was in the Infirmary. Both times." He grinned. "You could have signed your name and saved me and Teddy a bunch of work."

She grinned back. "What fun would that be? This way, you learned some new spells and counter curses and everything."

Harry gaped at her. "You knew what we were going through? And you just let us keep going and going . . ."

She shrugged, still smiling.

"You could be in Slytherin!"

"Perish the thought," she said and shuddered dramatically. "That's the only House the Hat didn't consider for me."

Harry didn't get more than a tiny bit annoyed about Hermione's prejudice about Slytherin House; he was well aware of his House's reputation amongst the rest of the school. He also knew it was, for the most part, completely undeserved, but now was not the time to

argue that with Hermione. "It considered all of them for me," he admitted.

"Why'd you choose Slytherin then?"

"I didn't so much choose," he told her, recalling the short conversation with the ratty old Hat a month and a half ago, "as the Hat decided I'd do best there. I just . . . I wanted somewhere to belong, where people would accept me for me."

Hermione nodded, looking a bit wistful. "I think sometimes I might have been better off in Ravenclaw. They would understand," she gestured to the books strewn across the table and her many parchments and quills and notes, "all this."

"Why'd you choose Gryffindor then?" Harry asked, throwing her own question back at her.

For some reason, Hermione's cheeks grew even redder. "Truth?"

"Well, yeah."

She wouldn't meet his eyes as she said, very quickly, "I thought you would be sorted into Gryffindor."

"You chose it because you thought I'd be in it, too?!"

She nodded, then hid her face in her hands.

Harry didn't know what to say. No one had ever desired his company like that before. He was just a Freak, just 'that idiot, Harry,' and not a person anyone wanted to spend time with. He had learned that lesson over the last ten years, if nothing else. And he liked Hermione all right, but that she would choose a house to be near him . . . Finally, he asked the only thing he could. "Why?"

She mumbled something into her hands, and he had to stop her. "I didn't catch that," he said.

Lifting her head, she sought his gaze, almost squirming in her seat under the weight of his regard. Then she cleared her throat and plowed ahead. "When I met you on the train, I knew you were someone I could be friends with. That I wanted to be friends with. I saw how you shared all those treats with Ron Weasley, and you didn't laugh at me when I was being so . . ." she shrugged, "you know, overbearing with all those book facts."

Harry had to smile. "I didn't think you were overbearing."

"See?" she said. "I knew you'd be a good friend."

It was Harry's turn to blush. He could feel his ears getting hot. "Thanks," he mumbled, and hunched his shoulder a bit.

Hermione pointedly looked away until he was back to himself, then she said, "I still really want to know what that spell was."

Harry laughed, and then showed her.

As Halloween neared, Harry was wishing for some free time to just kick back and relax. His schedule was very full, what with Quidditch practice -- the first game was just over two weeks away -- and his study sessions with Professor Snape, which were held every evening except when he had Quidditch, in which case, they were in the afternoon, as well as regular classes and study group meetings and making sure he got to each of the three meals each day. Sometimes he felt he had no time to himself. And even when he was alone, he wasn't really. The Bloody Baron was always nearby, his gaze impenetrable, even when his words were soothing and full of concern.

He never heard the Bloody Baron yell, though, until one afternoon when he was just outside Professor Snape's office, preparing to knock to be admitted for his "tutoring" session. He heard raised voices, and, though he knew eavesdropping was tactless, he could not help himself, especially once he heard his own name on the Professor's lips.

"I just can't believe how callous he's being!" Snape snarled. "Potter is the golden boy, isn't he? The Boy Who Wouldn't Bloody Die? Yet he would not credit my word!"

"Severus Snape," the Baron intoned, "calm yourself. Having a fit will not change anything."

"Except make me feel better."

The Bloody Baron chuckled. "Tell me what he said, then."

The Professor stalked back and forth, as if he were lecturing, but his steps were heavier than usual. Then he paused. "He accused Potter of cheating in one breath, and dismissed the danger Quirrell presents to the boy in the next."

"Cheating!" the Baron howled and his next words were mere sputters, "As if, the boy . . . only now has he the time! I'll show him cheating . . ."

Harry's hands had clenched into fists, furious at the indignity of the very idea. Cheating? Him? He didn't even know who this "him" was that had accused him, but right now he was seeing red, and wanted to punch someone.

". . . he had was the word of that old fussy cat," Snape was saying. He was pacing again.

"McGonagall accused him?"

Professor McGonagall? Harry was stunned. He knew the Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor didn't exactly like him, but she seemed decent enough. And she'd appeared genuinely pleased to see his grades improve. She had even smiled at him the other day after class, and said his father had been skilled in Transfiguration, and if Harry kept improving, she was sure he would be, too.

"That's what he said," said Snape. "Nothing overt, of course, just that 'concerns had been raised.'" There was the sound of something hitting a desk. A fist, maybe? Or a book? "Barmy old coot. Wanted

me to keep a closer eye on the boy, to make sure his study habits were up to snuff."

"Oh," the Bloody Baron said, in a much changed tone. "I see."

Snape whipped around -- Harry could hear the billow of his robes from where he hid, pressed up against the wall in the corridor -- and snarled, "You know something. Tell me."

"I believe . . ." The ghost sighed, and Snape made an impatient sound. "I believe the 'old coot' is making sure you have an excuse to continue to look out for the boy. If Quirrell is indeed dangerous to him, and if he has some connection to the Dark Lord, then any interactions you have with young Harry Potter will be suspect . . ."

"Unless I am ordered to undertake them," Snape finished. He sighed then. "Damn manipulating codger!"

"Indeed," the Baron agreed. "But it seems he is still looking out for you, which is a good thing, if the Dark Lord is rising again."

"And for the boy," Snape said, much more quietly, in an almost reluctant tone.

"And for the boy," the Baron said. "Who just so happens to be waiting in the hallway."

A brief, shocked pause, and then, "Potter!"

Harry shuffled into the room, head down. He could feel the weight of their stares. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"For the impertinence you've displayed in listening in on a private conversation, I assume," the Professor hissed.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, and risked a glance up. "But you were talking about me, sir, so I . . ." He shrugged. "I wanted to know what you were saying. Does Professor McGonagall really think I'm cheating?"

Snape's eyes were dark holes into nothingness, and his expression gave nothing away. It was the blank mask that Harry always disliked seeing the most. This mask was the one he himself often adopted when he didn't know how to react in a situation, and any way he could think to react would be mocked or yelled at. Blankness was safe . . . but it was hard to understand from this point of view.

Finally Snape said, "I do not believe so."

"Why'd she say it then? You know I haven't been . . . doing that. I wouldn't ever!"

Snape studied him again, still giving nothing away. "It's complicated, Potter. Did you bring your books?"

Raising his eyebrows, Harry also lifted his heavy book bag, which was obviously in his hands. He did not, however, say anything like, 'What does it look like?' since he didn't need to sign his own death warrant, thank you very much. Instead, he said, "Yes, sir. Charms, today."

"Get to work then."

Harry frowned, and opened his mouth to argue, since he wasn't done with this conversation, not by a long shot!

But Snape cut him off before he could get anything out, and said in one of his coldest tones, "Work now, talk later. If you do as you're told."

Pressing his lips together, Harry gave a short, angry nod, but went to the table where he usually worked and took out his books and parchment. He hated being left in the dark about things that concerned him. Who did they think they were, anyway? To shove him to the side, as if his feelings on the matter didn't count?

He was too angry, banging his quills and ink bottle about and slapping down parchment, to notice when the Bloody Baron came to hover over his shoulder, until the ghost said, "Be at ease, Harry Potter."

Harry jumped, startled, but then set his jaw. "I don't like being talked about."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Harry turned to glare at the ghost. "I've been lied about and talked about for ten years. Those stupid . . ." He broke off, not wanting to discuss the Dursleys. At all.

"The Muggles?" the Baron said softly.

A brief nod.

"They lied about you?"

"They said I cheated. Any time I got better grades than that whale of a cousin of mine. I obviously cheated, 'cause there was no other way I could do better than him at anything. He was obviously so superior." Harry snatched the stopper out of his ink bottle, not even caring that he splattered a few drops of black ink across the table.

"But you never cheated."

"No! I never did. I didn't have to. Dudders is such an idiot I'd have to try to do worse than him in school." Harry dropped into the chair and rubbed at his forehead, and the stupid scar that marked him as different. "Didn't matter, though. They said I cheated, and the school took their side. Always did."

"Doesn't sound fair," the Bloody Baron said.

Harry glared at him. "Of course it wasn't fair. Life isn't. I'm not a child, you know."

He expected the ghost to make the same protests he'd heard a million times, about how he was too still a child, despite having practically raised himself, and survived the Dursleys, not to mention an attack by a currently disembodied megalomaniac who meant to kill him in nasty ways.

So he was surprised when the Baron merely nodded. "As you say."

The quiet agreement quite took the wind out of him, and he stared at the desk, and his hands, clenched together on top of it. "I . . . I have to work on my Charms essay," he said inanely.

"You do that, Harry Potter," the Baron said. "And please, when you speak to your Professor Snape, remember, he has your best interests in mind."

He'd heard that before, from teachers, and the Headmaster at his primary school, and even that one cock up involving the school nurse. Too bad none of them had ever meant it. Still, he shrugged in response to the Baron, and got on with his essay.

An hour or so later, the discussion about the overheard conversation was less difficult than Harry had imagined it being.

"How much did you overhear, when you were lurking about in the hallway?" Professor Snape asked him, once Harry had finished his Charms essay, and after Snape had read it over and made some corrections.

Harry flushed. "I said I'm sorry about that."

Snape glared. "That doesn't answer my question."

Expression settling into a glare of his own, Harry muttered, "Fine. I heard you say that Professor McGonagall accused me of cheating, and then the Bloody baron said something that made you call someone a manipulating codger. But I haven't cheated, not at all!"

"I know you haven't, Ha -- Mr. Potter. I have been monitoring your school work, have I not?"

Harry's eyes narrowed as he looked at Snape. Had the Professor nearly called him by his first name? Then he shook his head, the uncomfortable feeling of being falsely accused of something making his stomach twist into knots. "Then why would she say I did?"

"I do not believe she did." Snape held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth to argue. "I believe the Headmaster told me she did, so as to make me . . ." His mouth twisted as if he tasted something sour. "To encourage me to leap to your defense, as a falsely accused member of my House."

Harry stared at him, and stared some more. Then he crossed his arms over his chest, unconsciously mirroring his professor's stance. His mind was awash with questions, but the only one he could vocalize was, "What does Quirrell have to do with it, sir?" Snape looked down his long nose at Harry, and raised an eyebrow, and Harry quickly amended his question to, "I mean, Professor Quirrell."

Snape nodded shortly. Then he held Harry's gaze for a long moment, as if measuring him. Harry sat up straight, not wishing to be found less than adequate in Snape's regard. Snape nodded again. "I believe, as does the Bloody Baron, that Professor Quirrell," Harry noticed the slight sneer that accompanied the honorific when it came from Snape's mouth, but didn't call him on it, "is working for the Dark Lord. We believe he will try to kill you again. It is my opinion that the Headmaster wants me to keep an even closer eye on you, to make sure that does not happen."

Harry's hands had started to tremble, and he clasped them together on his desk top. He knew Quirrell was up to no good, and was probably working for the same monster who had killed his parents and tried to kill him when he was just a baby. But to have it spoken so baldly . . . it was startling. Not least because he was unused to people telling him the truth like this. And Snape was, he realized. Snape wasn't holding back to spare his feelings or to pretend the danger wasn't real. Harry was grateful for that, but he was still . . . startled.

"But sir, why didn't he just tell you to do that then? Why be coy about it?"

Snape's eyes flashed with some unnamed emotion, and he turned away in a billow of robes. "That is none of your concern."

"But sir!"

"No, Potter. I have told you what you need to know. The rest is immaterial."

Harry scowled at the man, who had yet to turn back to face him. Snape's hands were clenched into fists and his body was held so tight it looked like he might explode any second. Harry had no idea why, but the reason for Dumbledore's roundabout way of having Snape protect him was obviously causing Snape some distress. And though he was loath to admit it, Harry knew the reason was really probably none of his business.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said softly. "I didn't mean to pry."

Snape whirled around again, his expression one of surprise, before his face was carefully schooled once more to that blank mask. He held Harry's gaze for a few more moments before he inclined his head slightly. "It is nearly dinner time," he said. "Go on now and eat before practice."

"Yes, sir." Harry rose, collecting his book bag and slinging it over his shoulder. "Thank you," he said, glancing back at the professor as he reached the door. "For sticking up for me."

Snape shook his head just a bit, but the sharp brittleness in his eyes softened, and he waved a hand in silent dismissal.

Harry smiled and slipped through the door.

TBC . . .

A/N: Snapalicious hugs for all!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 28

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Previously:

"Yes, sir." Harry rose, collecting his book bag and slinging it over his shoulder. "Thank you," he said, glancing back at the professor as he reached the door. "For sticking up for me."

Snape shook his head just a bit, but the sharp brittleness in his eyes softened, and he waved a hand in silent dismissal.

Harry smiled and slipped through the door.

Severus watched the boy go and shook his head again. He was getting soft, and he could not afford to. Yet, the Bloody Brat Who Had Just Thanked Him, Against All Odds kept managing to surprise him. He could not help but agree with the little voice inside that reminded him that Potter was not his father's son. Not by a long shot.

The Bloody Baron, who had remained unusually quiet during his talk with the Brat, floated out the door to keep guard on Potter till he got up to the Great Hall for his meal. Between Severus and the ghost, they would make sure no one attacked the boy. They had to.

The next week went by fairly quickly and with minimum of fuss, and Halloween arrived. Severus detested the holiday, if for no other reason than it gave Albus reason -- as if he ever required any, truly -- to hold a feast and feed the children too much sugar. They were always completely unmanageable for days on either side of any holiday, and this year was no exception.

Harry Potter, on the other hand, seemed to have come over all melancholic. Severus was not going to ask why, but he did listen to the Bloody Baron chatting with the boy during his study time on October 30th. He had noticed the Baron spending a great deal of time talking with Potter over the last couple months, and he knew the boy

confided more in the ghost than probably anyone else, even the Nott boy, or his Quidditch mates. It was unusual, to be sure, since in Severus' tenure at Hogwarts, and even when he had been a student, he could not recall a single person the Baron had ever spent more than a few minutes with over the course of their entire matriculation. And yet, the Bloody Baron spent copious quantities of time with Potter, rarely leaving his side if the boy was outside of the Slytherin common room.

Tonight being no different, the Baron floated by Harry's left shoulder as the boy worked on an essay for Herbology. At his desk, Severus remained, to all appearances, casually uninterested and focused on his grading. In truth, he had not read a word his be-damned third years had committed to paper in well over twenty minutes, while the Baron and Harry spoke of how he was managing in his other classes, and how Quidditch practice was going. Normally, Severus would not give a shrivelfig for any of this small talk, but he knew the boy would open up to the Baron sooner or later about his current mood, and he wanted to know what was bothering the boy . . .

There. He'd admitted it. He . . . cared.

"Halloween Feast tomorrow," the Baron said. "I imagine you're looking forward to that."

Potter shrugged one shoulder. "I guess."

The ghost peered at him, cocking his insubstantial head to the side. "You are not looking forward to it."

"Haven't really given it much thought," the boy admitted. He shuffled his book closer and reread something in it before writing again.

"May I be so bold as to ask why? Most children, especially First Years, find the whole thing rather exciting."

"My parents died on Halloween." The words were so soft, Severus almost didn't catch them. In shock, he dropped his quill.

The Bloody Baron had reared back slightly, but then he nodded, and one of his ghostly, silver hands reached toward Harry's shoulder, though he did not actually make contact.

Playing with his own quill and staring at his hands, Potter went on, "I never even knew them, or how they died or anything, till Hagrid found me and told me. I had to find out when Voldemort killed them from a book Hermione leant me." He turned his gaze on the Baron at last, and from his angle, Severus could see the wideness of his eyes, the vulnerability in them, overlaid with pain. "So, I figured, this year, for the first time, I could sort of . . . I dunno. Mark their passing, or something. I don't think I'll go to the feast, is all. Seems kind of . . . like I'd be disrespecting them. Now that I know."

Even as Severus shook his head, the Bloody Baron did the same thing. But what the ghost said was, "I understand, Harry Potter. But consider, you have had too few opportunities to relax with your friends, and this feast would give you that."

Another one shoulder shrug. "Yeah. Maybe. I dunno." And he went back to his essay.

Severus watched him, giving up on pretending to grade. He was having another of those weird moments when his thoughts had been running counter to reality, and when the dichotomy caught up to him, he felt a bit lightheaded. Harry really had no knowledge of his parents. No memory at all of his mother and her sacrifice. Lily . . . the thought of her smile and bright green eyes gave Severus a fleeting, but no less real, physical pain in his chest.

Harry had needed to learn about their deaths from a book.

It was . . . unconscionable.

It was infuriating.

Severus would save his wrath for those who deserved it: Albus, for placing Potter with those Muggles, the Muggles themselves, and the Dark Lord, for murdering the boy's parents in the first place.

It was not until he heard the Bloody Baron clearing his throat that Severus jerked himself out of the reverie he had fallen into, to find Harry was clearing up his books and parchment and tucking them in his bag. He had almost been caught out staring, so he gave the Baron a small nod of appreciation for the warning, as Harry turned toward his desk and said, "Good night, sir."

"Anything to report, Potter?" Severus kept his voice cool and professional.

"Nope. Er . . . I mean, no, sir. Qu-- Professor Quirrell hasn't so much as called on me in over a week. And, no pain in my scar at night."

"Nightmares?"

A little shrug. "Just regular ones. Nothing with Him in." They both knew who the boy referred to.

"Very well." As the boy reached the door, Severus added, "If you need to see me, during the day tomorrow, I will be available after lunch."

Harry swallowed, but nodded quickly and avoided his eyes. "Thank you, sir."

He watched the boy leave, wondering why he'd felt the need to offer what was essentially -- he assumed -- a shoulder for the boy to cry on. He did not do shoulders upon which students cried. Suppressing a sigh, he took a trick from Harry's book and avoided the Bloody Baron's gaze as the ghost hesitated just inside the door.

"I'm surprised, Severus Snape," the ghost intoned. "But heartened by your offer."

"Oh, get out," Severus said irritably. Maybe now he could get some work done.

Nothing went well on Halloween.

In the morning, two of his Third Years got into a pissing match with the Weasley twins and came out of it with Gryffindor red skin with gold spots, a problem which proved rather more difficult to rectify than Severus would have hoped.

Minerva, of course, found the whole thing to be terribly amusing. Not as much so, once Severus lobbed a week's detention at all four boys, but that went without saying. She could be such a sour puss when she wanted.

In the afternoon, Severus made himself available for the Potter Brat, who never showed up, and who even skipped his regular study session. At least Severus got a good deal of potion ingredients prepared for next week's lessons, but he disliked the sensation that Potter was avoiding him.

And then there was the cock up of the Halloween Feast.

He should have known Quirrell would try something, but he had honestly not considered the possibility of the man letting a troll into the school. It was dangerous and foolhardy, and no one who knew the man at all could fail to realize who exactly amongst those with access to the school wards, also had an affinity for working with trolls.

That was neither here nor there. When Quirrell had announced the troll's arrival and then "fainted" dead away, Severus had known that either the Philosopher's Stone was in danger of being stolen, or Harry was in danger of being attacked.

Since the Brat Who Lived to Annoy Him was not present at the ball, and neither was the Baron, he had to assume the ghost was watching over the boy and would protect him. So it fell to Severus to go protect the stone.

He hated Fluffy.

A lot.

And who in their right mind named a hellhound "Fluffy," anyway??

Hurrying up the stairs, he cast a quick Disillusionment spell on himself. Would never do for some child who had not bothered to listen to their Prefects to see him tearing down the halls well away from the dungeons. When he reached the door on the third floor, it did not seem to have been tampered with, but he opened it, just to be sure. "Alohomora," he said quietly.

Beyond, the hellhound sat, crouched over the trap door. All three heads regarded him hungrily. Deep throated growls from three throats made the hairs stand up on Severus' neck. Long teeth dripped saliva in large splotches on the floor, and Severus thought he might be ill.

He kept his back to the door. He knew he had only seconds to cast the revealing spell, to see if anyone else had been here, before the hellhound launched itself at him. He got through the spells as fast as he can. Everything seemed secure, and his wand hand did not shake at all. It didn't!

As he grasped for the door handle, the growls grew louder and the scrabble of claws on the stone floor matched the scrabbling of his fingers against the latch. He was almost out the door when the closest of the three heads lunged at him, and sank its sharp fangs into his leg. The beast wrenched him back and forth, and it was all Severus could do to keep his balance as pain radiated from where the hellhound was latched onto him.

Severus gritted his teeth and ground out, "Stupefy!" The spell would not knock the beast out, any more than it would a dragon, but . . .

The hellhound stopped worrying Severus' leg, and reared back, shaking its head. Severus used the brief respite to flee.

Merlin, he hated that beast.

His leg throbbed as he limped away from the relocked door. He had a salve in his quarters he could use on it, but the dungeon was very far away. It hurt, and was bleeding, and there was a troll loose somewhere, and Potter probably was in danger. With these thoughts

in mind, he was not in the best of moods when he came across Quirrell lurking not twenty feet down the corridor.

"What are you doing here?" he snarled. "Shouldn't you be in the dungeons subduing the troll?"

"B-but, S-s-severus," the Defense Professor stuttered. "I w-w-wanted to make s-s-sure everything was s-s-safe here. I th-thought p-p-perhaps the t-troll was a d-d-diversion."

Severus' eyes narrowed dangerously. Was Quirrell finally admitting to his perfidy? "Indeed?"

"B-but you have it all in h-h-hand, y-yes?"

"Of course," Severus snapped.

"I would expect nothing less, my dear boy," interjected a new voice.

Severus whipped around, wand high. Even though he recognized the voice, one could not be too careful. He gazed at Albus, whose bright blue eyes took in the two Professors, the door, and even Severus' wounded leg, in a matter of seconds. Severus inclined his head sharply and lowered his wand. "Headmaster."

"Severus," Albus greeted. He looked Quirrell up and down. "Quirinus."

"I trust the troll has been dealt with," Severus said.

"In a manner of speaking," Albus said. "I should think you would find the girls' bathroom on the first floor very illuminating."

Severus glared at the Headmaster cryptic statement, but something in the old man's expression made Severus take a step back, eyes wide. Pain shot through his leg, and he bit his tongue to keep it from showing. Potter. It had to be Potter.

"Go," Albus said. "I'm here now."

With a sharp nod, Severus took off at a run, or as much of one as he could manage. At the bottom of the stairs, he could hear the roars of the troll, and the crash of heavy things being thrown or smashed, as well as at least one higher pitched yell, that of a child. By the time he reached the lavatory in question, however, dead silence reached his ears. To his surprise, Minerva was also running toward the door, and they reached it at the same time.

Minerva's lips were pressed together tightly, but even though she had been running, not a hair was out of place from her tight bun. She glared over Severus' shoulder, and he turned to see that Quirrell had followed him.

This day got better and better every second.

They had paused only for the space of a heart beat before Minerva flung open the door, to reveal a very unusual sight.

Potter -- he knew it! -- was standing, wand out, over a twelve foot, lumpy gray troll, while Theodore Nott looked on and Millicent Bulstrode crouched under one of the smashed sinks, softly encouraging the Gryffindor girl, Granger, to come out. The Bloody Baron hovered by the sinks, looking a bit less shiny than usual.

Severus glared at the two boys and took a moment to gather his thoughts as he checked the troll over. It was not dead, just knocked out. And it stank to high heaven.

Minerva had no such compunctions about watching her words. "What on earth were you thinking of?" Her voice was the essence of cold fury. Severus was impressed, despite himself. "You're lucky you weren't killed. Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

Snape glared at the Slytherins again, specifically at Potter . . . though he realized with a start that the boy should not have even known about the troll, since he had not been present at the Feast. The boy did not hold his gaze, but looked briefly at his shoes before bringing his head up to face McGonagall's wrath. Severus was content to let her yell at them a bit; he would have his chance later. In private.

"I, er . . ." Harry started.

A voice from under the sinks interrupted him. "Please, Professor McGonagall. They were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

The girl climbed to her feet. "I went looking for the troll because I -- I thought I could deal with it on my own -- you know, because I've read all about them."

Potter and Bulstrode stared at her, open mouthed, as she continued, "If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

"Well -- in that case..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at the lot of them, "Miss Granger, you foolish girl, how could you think of tackling a mountain troll on your own?"

Granger hung her head and said nothing, which was a sure sign of the Apocalypse, Severus was sure.

"Miss Granger, five points will be taken from Gryffindor for this," said Minerva. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not hurt at all, you'd better get off to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

The girl left, and Minerva turned to Severus' Slytherins, obviously with every intention of bending their ears over the issue. Severus knew there was more going on here than the Granger chit said, but he was certainly not going to let Minerva worm it out of his students. As she opened her mouth to start in on them, Severus straightened from where he had been crouched by the troll and said, "You three were lucky, but not many first years could have taken on a full-grown mountain troll. Five points to Slytherin for each of you."

He shot Minerva a sly smile as all three of his students gaped at him.

"I shall leave you to it, Professor," she said with a huff, obviously annoyed with having the wind removed from her sails. "But I shall be informing the Headmaster of this, you can be certain."

"Good evening, Professor," he said, agreeably.

"I will return to help remove the troll," she added. Once she had left, dragging a still faint Quirrell with her, Severus turned his glare on the three students. "Now. Tell me what happened." He stared each of them down. "And I want the truth."

Of the three, Potter was the first to reply, lifting his head. A spark of defiance glowed in his eyes. "It was just like Hermione said. We heard the troll in here, and her screaming, and so tried to get her out, first, by distracting it. Teddy threw some pipe or something, and I was just yelling at it, but Millie couldn't get her to leave, so then I . . ."

"Then you what?" Severus said in a dangerous tone. He was gratified to see Harry swallow hard.

"I, er . . . I jumped on its back." He stared at the troll at their feet and swallowed again. "My, er, wand went up its nose. Then Teddy levitated its club up and hit it on the head. . . ."

Severus closed his eyes briefly.

"I know it sounds bad, Severus Snape--" came the cool voice of the Bloody Baron.

"Of course it sounds bad," Severus snarled. "Because it is. You all could have been killed, and for what?"

"For a friend," Potter said softly. "I couldn't just let her get hurt."

With a long suffering sigh, Severus said, "Why were you not in your common room?"

"We hadn't heard about the troll," Potter said.

"None of you were at the feast?"

"No, sir," the Nott boy said.

Potter smiled shyly at them. "They wanted to stay with me. And I . . . I didn't want to go."

"Very well," Severus intoned. "Go to the common room now, all of you. We will discuss this more later."

A chorus of, "Yes, sirs," and they were gone.

"Well?" Severus snapped at the Bloody Baron once the door had closed. "You could not have told me what was happening?"

The Baron did not rise to the bait, but merely gave Severus a long look. "I sent a message to the Headmaster. Did he not find you?"

"He did."

"Well, there you are. Potter is fine, albeit having shown a remarkable lack of self-preservation instinct, and your Slytherins obviously have a loyal friend in Miss Granger."

"Bully for them."

"Perhaps you should get that leg looked at."

"Perhaps you should mind your o--" Severus stopped. "Very well." He sighed. "Keep an eye on him, will you?"

"Always, Severus. Always."

The ghost faded out of the room, and Severus traipsed off to the dungeons himself, wondering how to keep that boy safe, when he seemed determined to throw himself headlong into danger.

He only hoped both of them would survive the year.

TBC . . .

A/N: Some of the scene in the bathroom is quoted directly from the source material, McGonagall and Hermione's dialogue, specifically. I didn't put all of what I took from there into italics as I felt that would make it hard to read. Mocha Frappachinos for all!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 29

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Author's Note: Been trying for a couple days to get this posted; I could upload the document, but not add it to my story. Anyway, sorry for the delay.

Previously:

"Very well," Severus intoned. "Go to the common room now, all of you. We will discuss this more later."

A chorus of, "Yes, sirs," and they were gone.

Teddy looked at Harry sidelong as the three of them went back down to their common room. "Why'd you tell him that?" he asked.

Harry bit his lip and shrugged. "What do you mean?"

"Why'd you lie to the Professor?" Millie asked. "He wouldn't have--"

"Wouldn't have what?" Harry interrupted. "Taken a million points off us? Given us all detention forever?"

Millicent sighed and tucked the end of a long strand of hair into her mouth to nibble at it. "Well, yeah, okay. He might have. But he's gonna be worse when he finds out what we really did."

Harry nodded. He knew that. "Don't worry. I'll take the heat for it."

Teddy rolled his eyes. "Oh no, you don't. We didn't tell him, either, and you're not going to take all the blame on your own."

"But it was my fault. If I hadn't--"

"Don't, Harry," Millie interrupted. "Don't blame yourself."

"Well, but it's true. You both should've been at the feast."

Teddy stopped them, putting a hand on Harry's arm. Harry held himself very still, even as Teddy said, "But we weren't. We were with you, because you're our friend, and we wanted to be supportive today. You know, and stuff."

Harry nodded slowly. "Okay. Yeah, all right." He shrugged, not accidentally dislodging Teddy's hand, but Teddy didn't seem to notice, or mind, if he did. "But I'll tell the Professor what happened. Later."

Millie shook her head with a sly smile. "No, you won't. 'Cause I have an idea."

With identical raised eyebrows, Teddy and Harry gave her the Look. But she refused to say any more, just kept that smug little smile all the way back to the dungeons.

The three of them huddled at a corner table in the Slytherin common room, sipping hot chocolate and talking in low voices but not actually whispering. Whispering tended to attract attention, according to Teddy.

"Okay, so all we have to do is stick with the plan," Millie said. She took a long drink of her cocoa and gave Harry a pointed look. "And that means you can't go and do anything heroic."

"What do you think I am, a Gryffindork?"

Teddy snickered, pausing in the process of stacking pumpkin pasties in a lopsided pyramid across his end of the table. "Well, you did leap on the troll's back . . ."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Ted-dy," he said in an almost whine, "you were there. You know I didn't."

"But you do have terribly Gryffindork tendencies," Millie put in. "Rescuing that other kid's Remembrall, chasing bludgers, you know, things like that."

"Maybe I'm only dorky when I'm on a broom?" Harry suggested hopefully.

"Yeah, maybe." She didn't look convinced.

"Great," Harry huffed dramatically, and put his head in his hands. "Even my friends think I've gone round the bend."

"No, no," Teddy said with mock concern, and patted fingers sticky with pasty on the sleeve of Harry's robe. "You're fine. Just a bit . . . lionish."

Millie laughed. "Hopefully he'll ask to see us all together again. It'll be easier that way."

"Easier to lie," Harry said and sighed. "To Snape. We're all mad."

"Don't worry about it," Millie insisted. "Nothing can go wrong."

The only thing that Harry could think when Snape called him into his office after class the next day was, How could Millie have been so wrong?

Snape glared at him from behind his desk, with Harry perched on the rather uncomfortable chair in front of it. "Explain."

Harry stared at his hands. Snape could see his thoughts and memories with just a look, he remembered from one of their earliest encounters, and he was not going to give the man that opportunity. "Explain what, sir?"

The professor's hand slapped the surface of his desk, making Harry jump off his seat. He eased back on slowly, trembling. "Do not play me for a fool, Potter! I know very well that your story about last night's events was more than half fabrication. I do not know why your friends find it necessary to lie for you as well, but I will not have it!"

"They didn't lie!" Harry's hands clenched into fists as he glared at the professor. "They didn't say any--"

"Lies of complicity, Mr. Potter, are just as despicable." The corners of Snape's lips curled up in a sneer. "Would you care to rectify the situation now, or would you rather all three of you face the consequences?"

Harry swallowed hard. With a silent apology to Teddy and Millie, for going against their wishes, he nodded. "I'll tell you. But please, it wasn't their fault."

Snape held his gaze for a long moment, then nodded sharply. "If I am satisfied with your rendition, I shall not pursue any punishment for your cohorts."

"Okay." Harry nodded. "We were in the common room during the feast. But then the Bloody Baron came in, looking for me, I think, and said we had to stay in there. I asked why, and he said there was something dangerous set loose in the school, but not what it was. He told me I would be safe in the common room."

"And you decided it would be in your best interests to disregard his warning?" Snape's voice had dropped to a whisper, a very dangerous whisper that Harry recognized at once as something he had no wish to prolong.

"Um . . . well . . ."

"Answer the question!" the professor snapped.

"Yes, all right?" Pain flared in Harry's palms, and he looked at his hands in curiosity, to see his nails had bitten into the flesh hard enough to draw blood. Frowning, he shook out his hands and said, "I disregarded him. I knew Hermione was in the bathroom; I'd heard someone at lunch say she was upset and crying in there and had been since morning. And so, I knew she wouldn't know about any danger."

"You should have sent word to a teacher--"

"I asked the Bloody Baron to go warn her, and he wouldn't! He said he had to keep an eye on me." Harry drew a deep breath and looked

down again. His confession came out in a whisper. "So I figured he could keep an eye on me while I went to find Hermione."

Snape was silent so long this time that Harry almost thought he had not heard what Harry had said. When he finally looked up again, it was to find Snape staring at him, looking not angry per se, but very disappointed. His heart clenched. Angry he could deal with, he was well used to making people angry. But he did not want to disappoint his Head of House.

"Sir?"

Snape slowly shook his head. "I cannot believe, after all we have done to try and keep you safe this year, that you would put the Baron in such a position. That you would so endanger other members of your House, as well, with no regard for their safety or well being."

Feeling his face grow hot, Harry dropped his head again. Shame washed over him in a heavy wave. He hadn't been thinking of it that way, only that he had to rescue Hermione. Save her, like his own mother had saved his life, ten years before. But Teddy and Millie could have gotten killed, because of him and his stupid heroics. Maybe Millie was right. Maybe he was too much of a Gryffindork.

"I'm sorry, sir," he whispered.

"I should hope so," Snape said, his voice still soft and disappointed sounding. Harry flinched. "But sorry is just not enough."

"No, sir," Harry agreed. He steeled himself and looked up at the professor, needing to face his punishment head on.

Snape stared at him, his dark eyes unreadable. One long finger traced his lower lip as he stared, and Harry was sure he was going to get detention for the rest of his life. But then the professor sighed. "You will write another essay, this one on the topic of why you deem your life so worthless you would throw it away without thinking about the consequences."

"I'm not worthless!"

A spark of something ignited in the professor's eyes. "No. You are not. Which is why we shall explore why you seem to not care if you live or die."

Confused, Harry could do nothing but glare at the man, but Snape seemed not to care, or notice. "How long?" he asked at last.

"At least three feet. Due Monday evening."

Bastard. That would take him the whole weekend to write. And he didn't even know what to say.

"Tomorrow," Snape said, in a more normal tone of voice, "you and I will take a little trip." He rose from his desk and turned away, fiddling with a jar of something on one of the shelves of potion ingredients.

Harry squinted at him. "What? Where?"

"There is a place I believe you need to see. Be here, in my office, at 8 am sharp. Dress warmly." A moment's pause, then, "You are dismissed."

Startled at the abruptness, as well as the command to be ready to go on a trip the next day, Harry jerked up out of his chair and was half way to the door before he even realized what he was doing. Snape seemed to be paying no attention to him now, and Harry was grateful. He didn't know how he was going to make up for his latest mess, but he figured the essay would be a start. He just wished he had some idea of what to write. He wasn't worthless. And he wasn't trying to throw his life away on stupid things. Was he?

As he went down the corridor toward the common room, where he would meet his friends before dinner, the Bloody Baron floated up next to him.

"I did not tell him, young Harry Potter," the ghost said at his elbow.

Harry nodded. "I know. He just seems to know things."

"He is very concerned about you. He would be very upset were anything to befall you and he could prevent it."

Great, guilt and shame. "I know," Harry said miserably. "Do you know where he's taking me tomorrow?"

"I do not." The Baron floated along in silence until they were just outside the portrait to the common room. "I would suggest you tell him the rest of what happened, Harry Potter."

"Before he finds out on his own, you mean."

The Baron regarded him, head tilted a little to the side. "Not at all. I believe he thinks he has the whole of the story now and will not search for more details. But it is my opinion that he needs to know the kinds of magic of which you are now capable."

"That spell? But I don't even know where I learned it."

"Because you did not learn it, not in the normal sense of the word." The Baron paused, and looked away as if uncomfortable. "The spell is one we used when we fought together."

Harry gaped at him. "I didn't . . . I don't . . . How?"

"That is a very good question, and one I hope you will ask your Professor Severus Snape."

With a sigh of resignation, Harry nodded. "All right. Tomorrow though, okay? I don't think . . ." He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of Snape's office. "I don't think he wants to see me just now."

"Tomorrow will do, Harry Potter." The Bloody Baron gave him the smallest of smiles and a slight bow. "I shall see you anon."

Harry nodded in return and went into his common room. He did not look forward to telling Teddy and Millie how he had ground their plan

into dust. Nor was he looking forward to writing an essay on why he thought his life was worthless. Stupid, sodding bastard.

The next morning was Saturday. The Bloody Baron accompanied Harry to Snape's office, and left him there. Though he often wanted the Baron to leave him alone, mostly because he felt like he had so little time to himself, Harry almost wished the ghost would stay with him this time. But he wasn't afraid. Of course not. Not of Snape.

Of course not.

Still, it took him a minute to gather his courage to knock on the office door. He hadn't had such a hard time of it since one of his early detentions. At the barked, "Enter!" Harry eased the door open and slid inside.

The Professor, wearing a black, heavy looking cloak and dark gloves, looked him up and down. Harry glanced down at his own attire. He'd worn wool trousers and his new winter cloak and boots, as well as gloves, his green and silver Slytherin scarf, and a knit hat that covered his ears, as well as his scar. "Acceptable," Snape said. "Do you have your wand?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, and pulled it out of the inner pocket of his cloak.

"Good. Keep it ready." Snape held out a small, half-crushed matchbox.

Harry stared. "What's that, sir?"

Snape shook the box impatiently, as if he wanted Harry to take it. "Portkey."

"Er . . . what's a portkey?"

Snape's eyes narrowed, then his mouth twisted with a sigh. "I forget sometimes," he said in an undertone, "that--"

"I was raised by Muggles." Harry scowled. "I get that a lot."

Snape lifted one eyebrow. "I imagine you would, in Slytherin." He twisted his hand sharply to indicate the matchbox, and when he spoke again it was in his lecturing voice. "A portkey is a Wizarding method of travel, moving people and sometimes objects quickly from one place to another, without the danger of splinching or the need for a fireplace connected to the Floo Network. They are thus heavily regulated by the ministry." Harry didn't bother asking what a Floo was, figuring he'd find out eventually. "It can be a bit disorienting for novices, but I will be with you, so you should not have any trouble at the other end."

"Er, thank you, sir." He wondered if this portkey was regulation, but decided not to ask. If it was, he would look like a fool who thought his teacher would do something illegal, and if it wasn't, he'd be in on the illegal something. The situation was a no win, for him, unless he kept his gob shut.

"Now, take hold of the box, Potter, and don't let go."

"Yes, sir." Harry reached for the matchbox, curling thumb and index finger around his end. He looked up into the fathomless eyes of his professor, who had drawn his wand and had his own fingers wrapped tight on the other end of the box.

"Portus," Snape said, and there was a sudden lurch in Harry's gut, strong enough he was glad he had skipped breakfast, and felt as if a giant hook had snagged him right behind his navel and jerked him backwards through his own spine. Wind whooshed in his ears, louder than when he was on a broom, but unlike when he was flying, he could not tell up from down or left from right, but kept falling, falling . . . sideways?

The sensation continued for some time, which felt almost like forever, but could only have been a minute or two, and then he was definitely falling down and toward the ground, which rushed up to meet him. Harry braced himself for impact with the ground, but instead of smashing to his death, he just felt a rather soft bump. The feel was like going downstairs and thinking there was one more step, only to find you had already reached the bottom. Jarring. That was it. Harry stumbled from the non-step, and fell to one knee. His stomach

lurched again, and he squeezed his eyes shut tight to keep from spewing.

"Easy there, Potter," Snape said, and put a hand on his shoulder.

Harry flinched violently, and the hand went away quick enough he didn't have to shove it off his shoulder. Feeling his face redden with shame, even in the sudden cold of outdoors, Harry forced himself to his feet. "Sorry," he mumbled and opened his eyes. "I'm all right, though."

The professor's eyes were unreadable, and his expression was that careful blank that Harry hated to see. But then Snape just nodded, and turned to start walking along a path in front of them. Harry could see they were in a dense copse of woods, thoroughly overgrown but for the narrow footpath . . . which might have even been merely a game trail. The air was very cold, despite the autumn sunlight that managed to creep through the canopy, and Harry's breath escaped his mouth in white clouds as they walked.

"Where are we, sir?" he ventured after a few minutes.

Snape didn't answer, but led him around another bend in the path to where it opened up into a clearing of sorts, with a small building off to one side that looked like a church. Snape moved to the right so Harry could join him, and gestured again, this time to what was all around them.

Gravestones. Hundreds of them.

"A cemetery?" Harry asked. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You have never been here before." It was not quite a question, but Harry answered it anyway.

"No. Should I have?"

Snape's dark gaze took on an irritated cast. "I would have hoped so. But . . . no matter. You are here now. This way." Once more he led the way, this time across several rows of plain white markers, and

then some taller, marble affairs, one with an angel with outspread wings, and then a wide obelisk with a star on top.

Finally, the professor stopped, in front of some marble headstones that seemed at first glance like many of the others. His face went unnaturally still as he stared at the marker.

Harry followed his gaze to see what he had never imagined to see on an outing with his Head of House: His parents' gravestone. It had their names, and the date they died, and an inscription on the bottom that read:

The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.

His parents lay beneath this cold and unforgiving ground. His parents, whom he could not even remember, except in dreams or nightmares. He had never been here before, and could not understand why he was here now. "Why . . ." Harry swallowed thickly. "Why'd you bring me here?"

Snape's voice was very low as he said, "I thought you might want to see where they were laid to rest."

Harry could not meet his gaze. "You've been here before?"

"Only once. For their funeral. To say good bye."

"To my parents?" He frowned and glanced over at Snape. "I thought you hated them."

"No, Harry," the professor said quietly. There was an edge to his voice that had not been there before, but Harry could not figure what it could mean. "I did not get along with your father, it is true. But I did not hate your mother." The tall man shook his head and turned away from the gravestone and his dark eyes were bright, almost shiny. "Far from it, in fact."

Harry drew in a sharp breath. "You were friends? With my Mum?"

Snape nodded again, and Harry, hardly daring to hope, could feel his heartbeat thudding in his chest. "I was."

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who continues to read and give support on this story! Your reviews are all wonderful, and are both humbling and awe inspiring. Since some people have asked, yes, I do write my own stories and novels, and have even sold a few of the former -- see my bibliography via my webpage for more information, if you're so inclined. Natürlich, my ambition is to sell my novels, too, and eventually rest comfortably on my laurels. Lol

Meantime, spiced pumpkin lattes all around! For those trying to cut back on those caffeinated holiday treats, I've got these one-of-a-kind Harry hugs, fresh off the presses. . . .

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 30

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Warning for spoilers from Deathly Hallows. But then, if you haven't read book seven yet, what are you doing reading my fic? Go now! Come back when you're done. I'll wait. . . .

Updated to correct a horribly stupid mistake. Yikes.

Previously:

Harry drew in a sharp breath. "You were friends? With my Mum?"

Snape nodded again, and Harry, hardly daring to hope, could feel his heartbeat thudding in his chest. "I was."

Severus watched the play of emotions over Harry's face, and thought for the first time about how unfair it was that the boy had never had a chance to know his mother. Lily had been a beautiful person, not just fair of face, but full of life and joy and . . .

And the boy was speaking. Severus gave him his attention in time to hear the end of his request, ". . . me about her?"

For a long moment, Severus stared at Harry, his heart in his throat, almost literally. How could he have thought this was a good idea? His own emotions were a mess; it had been years, many years, since he had so devotedly thought about Lily, her life and her death, and about their friendship, about how much he loved her, even after it was clear she no longer wanted him near her.

How could he explain any of that to a child? To this child?

And yet . . . and yet the boy was gazing up at him with such hope in his eyes that it took Severus' breath away.

"We were friends," he said at last. Then he cleared his throat, embarrassed at the thickness of his voice. He looked away, in the direction of far off Spinner's End, and the neighborhood park where he had first seen his first -- and only -- love. "We knew each other even before we went to Hogwarts. I met her . . . on a playground near where we both lived."

"Really?" Harry's voice was breathless, his eyes wide, as if Severus was imparting unto him the secrets of the universe. In a way, he supposed, he was.

He managed a sardonic smile. "Really. Do you imagine I would lie about such a thing?"

The boy's already pink cheeks darkened to a deeper red as he looked down. "No! No, sir. Sorry. I just . . . I never thought . . ."

"That your old professor was once a child like yourself?" His smile deepened. "You would be amazed, Mr. Potter, how much you and I are alike." And in that moment, he realized exactly how true his statement was. The truth of it rocked his foundations once again, and he had to shake himself bodily, to recall where he was in place and time. The cemetery. Lily's gravesite.

"We . . . we are?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter. Would you like to hear how, or would you rather I spoke more of your mother?" He knew which the boy would choose, and thus was safe from questions about himself.

"My Mum, please. Please, sir."

Severus nodded, his gaze once more on the gravestone. On her name. On the date she died. Ah, Merlin. How was he going to do this? "Your mother was Muggleborn. You know what that means, correct?"

"That both her parents were Muggles. Right?"

"Indeed. And so she had no idea she was a Witch. Until I told her."

"Like me and Hagrid."

"Just so." That it had fallen to Hagrid to inform the Brat Who Lived to Bring Back Memories that he was a Wizard was one of many of the failings of Dumbledore's grand plan for the boy's upbringing. Another, of course, was leaving him with Petunia Evans in the first place. Severus sighed. "I saw her in that Muggle playground, as I said, and saw definite signs of magic in her. From the way she could reach amazing heights on the swings, then almost fly as she jumped off them, to the way she all but glowed with power. In time, I made myself known to her and her sister--"

"Aunt Petunia." The words were so soft, that Severus almost did not recognize the disgusted tone that accompanied them. Interesting. From their previous discussions -- and Harry's earlier essay about rules -- he had not gotten the impression that the boy regarded her with so much animosity, despite having all the reasons in the world to do so. Perhaps now he felt safe enough to show his true feelings. An interesting development, if so.

"Yes. She was there as well. Before Lily went to Hogwarts, she was as enthralled with the idea of magic as your mother was. She even wanted to go to Hogwarts herself. Her attitude changed in time, obviously."

The boy snorted derisively.

Severus nodded. "As you well know," he agreed. "When I first told her, Lily did not believe she was a Witch, but after a while, after several incidents of accidental magic, she had no choice but to. And then she sought me out." He knew his expression had turned wistful, and did not bother to try and hide it. The boy's expression matched his own, anyway, the two of them joined in their recollections -- or lack thereof -- of the woman who had meant so much to each of them. Smiling slightly, Severus continued, "We became friends. I told her what I knew of the Wizarding world, what I had learned from my own mother, and together we looked forward to getting our letters."

Harry's forehead creased in puzzlement as he peered into Severus' face. What he saw there, Severus could not have said. "What happened?"

With another nod for the boy's perceptiveness, Severus said, "I was sorted into Slytherin, and she was sorted into Gryffindor."

"Like my father."

"Yes." Severus swallowed down the taste of his misery and went on. "For several years, we remained friends, or as friendly as we could be, given House rivalries at the time. She enjoyed Potions almost as much as I did, and we even experimented a few times in making potions of our own design. She excelled in Charms, and we often worked on joint projects. Much like you and your Miss Granger, we spent a lot of time in the library together."

Severus paused, considered his words carefully, then said in a much lower tone, "But I had friends in Slytherin whom she did not approve of, and she had ones in Gryffindor I could not abide. Eventually, inevitably, we parted ways." The memory of that day at the end of fifth year, the day he had irrevocably lost her trust with one word, was enough to make his chest tighten and his eyes moisten with ashamed tears, even now. The look on Lily's face when he had called her that filthy word was the worst sight he had ever seen in his whole life. She had jumped to his defense, when Potter and Black were having their fun at his expense, and he had spurned her forever. His betrayal still hurt and always would, he knew. And he deserved every sharp pain it caused him.

I'm sorry, Lily. Truly.

Finally, once he gathered his courage, he went on, knowing he needed to say this last thing, to her son, so he would know. So someone besides Dumbledore would know. "Despite that, I always cared for her. Always."

Surprisingly, Harry asked no more questions about their relationship. His own eyes bright with unshed tears, he simply said, "Thank you, sir."

Severus ran a gloved hand over the top of the gravestone, and took a cleansing breath, to get his emotions under control once more. "You are welcome, Harry."

The boy said nothing about the familiarity, and Severus was glad. If things had been different . . . No. He would not dwell on might-have-beens. He knew better than to indulge in foolish fantasies like that.

"What did she look like?" Harry asked, breaking the silence after a few minutes.

Severus gave the boy a piercing stare. "You have no pictures of her?" Surely Petunia could not hate her sister that much?

But Harry shook his head. "No, sir. None." He paused, bit his lip, then seemed to decide something. "Not of my Dad, either. But he's got a picture of him in the trophy room."

Ah, yes, the Quidditch star. Severus forbore to say anything derogatory, however, about the man who had made much of his seven years at Hogwarts a living hell, as this was neither the place nor time for such pettiness. And it was petty, he knew, to dwell on such injuries to his pride after so many years. But then, he was a bitter and petty man, in many ways. He had accepted that about himself a long time ago. More recently, of course, he had accepted that he was a bully, too, but he was working to change that, firstly with this boy in front of him.

"I . . . I have some pictures of your mother," he admitted slowly. That was one way he could make up for the wrongs he had done. "I would be willing to show them to you."

The joy that shone in Harry's eyes and made his whole face glow was something Severus had never thought to see in his lifetime. "Really? Oh, thank you, sir!"

Embarrassed by this display, Severus nodded curtly. "It's time to go back," he said. "I have work to do. As do you, if I am not mistaken."

Harry nodded, then sighed a little and crouched in front of the gravestone, where he traced his gloved fingers along the engraved letters that spelt his parents' names. Once again, Severus had to look away, lest his emotions overcome him. It had been ten years. Surely he should be over this by now.

When the boy stood, finally, Severus motioned for him to head back to the woods, where they would take the portkey he had prepared for their return trip. Lost in his own thoughts, he did not hear Harry's question, until the boy said, a little more loudly, "Sir?"

"Yes, Potter?"

"I asked if my parents lived around here? I mean, I thought I saw other buildings outside the churchyard."

"Yes, they lived in Godric's Hollow, the town which surrounds this church. It's a primarily Wizard town, and many renowned families live here, or used to."

"Like who, sir?"

"The Dumbledores lived here for a time. And Bathilda Bagshot, author of A History of Magic," he smirked down at the boy, "which you are obviously familiar with. Or should be."

Harry laughed. "Yes, sir. Anyone else?"

"Think about it. Godric's Hollow."

"Oh! Godric Gryffindor?"

"Indeed."

"Wow."

Severus snorted a laugh. "Indeed."

It took them only a few minutes more to reach the spot from where they would portkey, and this time, Severus made a point of telling Harry he would hold his arm to make sure he didn't fall at the other end of their journey. He did not want a repeat of the scare he had given the boy when they had arrived here. He understood the cause, of course, but did not want to exacerbate the situation. Harry's cheeks reddened with embarrassment, but Severus pretended not to notice.

The return trip was uneventful, and they landed in Severus' office a moment later.

"It's nearly lunch time," Severus said. "You should have just enough time to change and make it up to the Great Hall to sit with your year mates."

Harry nodded and started for the door, but he had not gone more than a step or two before he turned back. His eyes were clear and bright. Lily's emerald eyes. "Sir? Thank you, for taking me to . . . to see them."

Severus inclined his head. "You're welcome."

Harry licked his lips, almost avariciously. "About those pictures . . ."

Severus raised an eyebrow, mouth curled in a semblance of a sneer. "I will show them to you when I have received your essay, Potter," he said. When the boy's expression grew crafty, he hastened to add, "But mind this: I will know if you rush through it in order to get your reward, and if you rush . . . then you will have no reward."

Harry's face fell, but he nodded. "I'll do it right," he promised.

"I know you will, Harry." And he did. His previous essay was proof of that. "Go on now. Your nutritional supplement will be awaiting you at lunch, as you did not see fit to eat breakfast."

Harry's eyes grew wide, thinking, no doubt, that Severus had read his mind. But this time, he had not needed to; hearing the boy's stomach rumble hungrily all morning had been quite enough of a clue.

He smiled, giving nothing away. "Go on," he said again, and Harry fled.

Shaking his head slightly, he returned to his quarters and the hidden drawer in his desk where he kept his photographs of Lily. As he went through the small stack, he alternately cursed himself for making the offer to Harry, and cursed the Dark Lord for taking his Lily away. It had been years since he went through these pictures, and each one held a memory, for good or ill.

After an hour or so, he could take the trip through the memories no more, and went to work on his potions, the one thing guaranteed to make him lose himself. Some days, he wished he could lose himself forever.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who continues to read and give support on this story! Happy Holidays, and Snapey hugs for all . . . I think he needs them.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 31

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Previously:

Harry's eyes grew wide, thinking, no doubt, that Severus had read his mind. But this time, he had not needed to; hearing the boy's stomach rumble hungrily all morning had been quite enough of a clue.

He smiled, giving nothing away. "Go on," he said again, and Harry fled.

In the Slytherin Common Room the next evening, Harry sat at the table with his study group mates as they worked on a project for Transfiguration. They were supposed to be turning a thistle into a whistle, and since they had to make sure the whistle worked, it was immediately apparent if the transfiguration had been complete or not. Fortunately, Harry recalled, from one of the books he and Teddy had perused, a counter for stinging curses which came in handy against nettles. Everyone was using the spell liberally on lips, tongues and fingers.

Rather than work on the project, however, Harry was scribbling madly on a long sheet of parchment, trying to finish the essay due the following day. He had only about a foot and a half so far, meaning he was only half way done. It was miserable work, but he was not fool enough not to finish.

Realizing suddenly that the group around him was quiet, he looked up. Millie gave him a pointed stare. "It's your turn, Harry."

"Oh. Sorry." He lifted his wand, focused on the reedy plant into front of him and waved his wand just so . . . "Factus Barba!" Now a thin tin whistle lay on the table. He gingerly picked it up -- no stinging yet -- and held to his lips -- still no stinging -- and blew. No stinging, but no sound, either.

Or so he thought.

From the nearest dormitory came the cacophony of several owls hooting at once, and a Third Year girl's shout of, "What the hell?!"

"Nice going there, Potter," Zabini said with a smirk. "You made a bird call."

"Better than you did," Millie countered, sneering. "Or was that incantation you yammered on about supposed to shred the thistle?"

"Shut it, Bulstrode."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever. You did good, Harry," she said.

"Thanks." Harry grinned. "Your turn."

"Here goes nothing," she said with a sigh. When she got no better results than the last time she tried, even when Harry gave her a pointer on the wand motion, she sat back with a huff and watched as Draco took his turn. Then she leaned over to Harry and said quietly, "What are you working on?"

He jerked the scroll out of her view and put his hand over it for good measure. "Nothing."

"Oh, right. Sorry. I didn't realize you thought I was stupid."

"I don't!" He bit his lip and flicked a quick glance at Zabini. He didn't want to lie to his friend, but he didn't want to tell her about his essay for Snape, either. It was really embarrassing. "But it's, erm . . . it's personal."

"Uh huh." She scrunched her nose up and scowled at him. "Anything to do with you ruining the cover story we had planned for the Professor?"

"Umm, yeah." He sighed. "Kind of. I have to do this for punishment, anyway. It's got to be done by tomorrow night, and I'm barely half way there."

She jutted her chin out. "If you'd stuck to the plan--"

"I couldn't lie to him, all right?" Nor could he explain how much he hated that he had disappointed Snape, or how much it meant to him that Snape took him to see his parents' graves. It was all too bloody personal. Harry forced his hands to unclench and took a slow breath. "I . . . I just couldn't."

"Well fine," she said with a huff of annoyance. "Next time, just say so, and I won't waste my time coming up with a brilliant plan to save your hide."

"Your plan was brill, Millie. Honest." He chewed on his thumbnail nervously, just thinking about that confrontation with Snape. "I dunno why I couldn't play along."

"Your head got knocked about by the troll, I guess."

Harry glanced at her sideways, not sure if she was having him on. He caught the sparkle of humor in her eyes, though, and allowed himself a small smile in return. "No doubt." He sighed. "The Bloody Baron said I should tell the Professor about the spell I used, too."

He had her full attention now. "Harry . . . are you sure about that?"

"Yeah. I mean, he said so, right after I told Snape what really happened."

"But . . ." She glanced at Draco and Zabini, but neither seemed to be listening in; in fact, Draco was currently trying to convince Zabini that there was no "R" in Factus, to no avail. She turned back to Harry, eyes narrowed. "But you know you're the only one he talks to, right? The only one who can even hear him?"

Harry frowned. "Um, no? I mean, you were there when he warned us about the dangerous thing in the halls the other night. And when I told him Hermione was in the girls' lav."

Millicent looked uncomfortable but she held his gaze. "Well, Teddy and I saw him float in and come over to you. And we heard you telling him about that Gryffindor girl, but we couldn't hear him."

Harry's mouth dropped open. He felt it fall. How was it he hadn't realized this? The Baron spoke to Professor Snape, he knew; he'd heard enough of their conversations. But had he truly never heard the Baron speak to another student? Thinking back over the last two months, he realized Millie was right. Weird.

"Weird," he said.

"Yeah."

"I didn't know."

"I guessed that."

Sighing loudly, Harry dropped his face into his hands. He was such a freak.

Harry stayed up late that night, using a bit of wand light under the covers to continue to work on his essay. The lines on the parchment were a bit crooked, but at least he didn't spill any ink on his bed sheets. On Monday, he worked on the essay some more during lunch and through his free period afterwards, and finally finished just before dinner. It had been a monster to write. Just thinking about the topic, for one thing, was enough to make his chest feel all tight. And coming up with examples of how and when he had been rather free with his own safety or even his life, was more eye-opening than he would have guessed.

Like the time he was seven, or maybe eight, and just had to rescue a neighbor's kitten who was stranded high in a tree. Dudley and his friends were throwing stones at the poor thing, and instead of waiting for the neighbor to get his ladder or call the fire department or whatever, Harry had climbed the tree to protect it. He spent an hour dodging stones and chasing the kitten through the small and occasionally fragile branches, until both he and kitten came crashing down as was inevitable, really, given his luck.

The kitten landed on its feet and bounded away. Harry, however, had sprained his ankle and left shoulder, and then had been punished with no food for the entire time he was unable to perform his regular chores at the Dursleys. But he could have been hurt far worse than that. He'd actually been quite lucky not to break his neck.

Harry hadn't honestly considered all the times he'd just rushed into a situation without thinking and tried to save someone, or some thing, or even his own hide, and ended up getting hurt or almost killed. Or worse, getting someone else hurt.

He supposed that was the point of the exercise.

Still, he wished he could curl up into a tiny little ball of dust and float away on the wind, rather than face down his professor with this essay. On the way to Snape's office on Monday evening, he dragged his feet under the watchful eye of the Bloody Baron, not wanting to ever get there if he could help it. The only reason he could think of, for not just making a run for it, was that he would get to see pictures of his Mum for the first time.

The Baron floated silently beside him for most of the trip, but eventually, Harry could not take the quiet anymore and said, "Why don't you talk to anyone else?"

The ghost turned his head slowly and regarded him with fathomless, dark-as-midnight eyes. "I do speak to others."

"Well, Professor Snape, yeah. I've heard you talk to him. But don't you talk to any other students?"

"I do not find myself needing to communicate with them, Harry Potter."

"But you need to communicate with me?"

"Of course." The Baron's ghostly eyebrows rose. "We have fought together, Harry Potter, you and I. We have shared blood. There are

few Wizard bonds as strong. Even had I not sworn to protect you, how could I not seek you out and speak with you?"

Harry's gaze was drawn to the Baron's chest wound that perpetually leaked silvery blood, and without thinking, his hand rose to touch his own chest, where his own wound had been. It was gone now, but for a pale scar marring his skin. "Will we always have a bond like this?"

Harry could have cursed his voice for sounding so small and hopeful, but he really wanted -- needed -- to know that he would share a connection with this ancient being for a long time, if not forever. The Baron was his closest confidant; not even Teddy or Millicent knew a quarter of his secrets, compared to the Bloody Baron. And he wanted someone to want to be with him . . . just for him.

"We will, Harry Potter. Till the end times."

Unable to keep the grin off his face, despite the grim way the Baron made his pronouncement, Harry hid his face instead. He'd never had a friend forever before. Hell, at two months, Teddy and Millicent were current record holders for the longest time he'd ever had a friend at all.

At last they reached Snape's office. The Bloody Baron waited while Harry knocked and was bade to enter. Giving the ghost a wry, grateful smile over his shoulder, Harry did as he was told.

Professor Snape sat behind his desk, scribbling notes on essays in that dreaded red ink he always used. Harry figured he must have stock in the ink company, since no one got an essay back from Snape that wasn't coated with the stuff.

Without looking up, Snape pointed at the uncomfortable chair in front of his desk, and Harry moved quickly to sit in it. He held his parchment loosely rolled in one hand, so as not to scrunch it and make it unreadable -- as Professor Flitwick said was sometimes the case with his essays. He kept his gaze on his hands, not wanting to draw the professor's attention before it was necessary.

To distract himself from the inevitable discussion of his essay, Harry thought about the pictures the Professor had promised to show him. Were they all from Hogwarts, he wondered? Or were some from even earlier years, before his Mum got her first Hogwarts letter, when she had been friends with a young Severus Snape, as hard as that was to imagine? Would there be ones of Aunt Petunia then, too? If so, he could skip over those readily enough. He wondered if there were photos of his parents after they left school? What if there were ones of himself as a baby or of their wedding or . . .

"Potter."

Harry stood quickly and snapped his attention up to his Professor's face. "Yes, sir?"

"Kindly hand over your essay. Did you bring any revision work with you, for your other classes?"

"Er . . ." After passing the parchment to Snape, Harry bit his lip and looked down. He hadn't thought about studying here tonight, but only about his essay and getting to see the pictures. But he should have remembered that Snape said he would have to read the essay before letting Harry have his reward. "No, sir," he said softly, feeling a bit of a dolt.

"I see." The professor hesitated for a moment then said, "You may do some work preparing ingredients for me then, while I look over your work."

"Yes, sir." Harry's stomach sank; what horrors would there be to deal with tonight? "What would you like me to do?"

"There are some chipped dragon scales that need to be separated into sixty even portions, each having three or more colors represented. The sixty receptacles are on the worktable, along with a titanium bowl of scales." Mouth pursed, he tapped the rolled up essay on his desk top. "Questions?"

"No, sir!" Harry fairly flew into the classroom. Separating dragon scales! Compared to some of the jobs he'd done -- cutting up

Flobberworms and Bobotubers came to mind immediately -- this was a cake walk. Indeed, the job wasn't hard or messy at all. He had to wear dragonhide gloves, as the scales could be very sharp and cut through a finger before you realized it, but the professor had a pair that sized magically to fit any hand, and so were not too loose on him, despite his small hands.

The dragon scale chips ranged in size from smaller than Harry's least fingernail to almost as large as his palm. The containers to hold them, however, were large enough to accommodate both extremes in size, and everything in between. The scales themselves were beautiful, shimmering even in the meager light of the dungeons in an array of colors broader -- and shinier -- than any rainbow. Every time Harry held one of the scales up to inspect it, sparkles of bright light arched off the dungeon walls and cascaded down the sides, like a multi-faceted waterfall.

Altogether, this was a job Harry wouldn't mind doing again.

He lost himself in the colors and light. When a silky voice sounded from behind him, saying, "Are you finished yet?" he startled rather severely.

Harry dropped the scale he was currently separating from its fellows, and cringed as it hit the worktable with an audible clang. "Sorry, sir," he said quickly, turning round to see his professor, hunching his shoulders automatically. "Sorry for being clumsy."

Silence greeted his words, and he chanced a look up at Snape's face. He could not read the expression he saw there, so he bit his lip and said hesitantly, "I'm almost done, sir, honest."

"Good. Finish up then, and return to my office. You and I have some issues to discuss." Snape turned and stalked back into the other room.

For the second time that evening, Harry felt his stomach drop like a stone. His essay must be utter crap, he decided. And Snape wasn't going to let him see those pictures of his Mum. Harry's eyes stung suddenly, and his throat closed up. He bit the inside of his cheek to

stave off any tears. He was not going to cry over pictures! He hadn't seen them before, so not having them now was no big deal. Right?

Right.

The shine had quite gone off the dragon scales as Harry finished sorting them, knowing he was going to be lectured or worse in a few minutes. Snape'd probably assign him detention now, since the essay wouldn't count as punishment, if it was as bad as he thought.

With a soft sigh, Harry returned the gloves to their storage place, and put the labeled containers of dragon scales in the inventory closet. Then he wiped down the table and trudged into Snape's office as if he was going to the gallows.

"Sit," Snape said, pointing at the chair Harry had occupied earlier in the evening. Once Harry had, the professor regarded him solemnly for several long moments before speaking again. "You seem to have a real . . . saving people thing, Pot--Harry."

Harry looked up in surprise at Snape, for using his given name. What was that about? "Sir?"

"It's a terribly Gryffindor tendency, to charge in without considering the consequences of your actions, with no regard for your own safety. But you, Harry, are no Gryffindor."

Harry swallowed. "No, sir?"

"No. Only a Slytherin could have survived ten years of living with those Muggles without killing them, whilst managing to keep his sanity intact."

Harry's eyes widened. Surely he didn't mean . . . "Sir?"

"You misunderstand me," Snape said, his voice uncharacteristically soft, without being menacing. "I do not mean to imply that you should have sent them to their graves, only that . . ." He sighed and then glared at Harry. "Why must this be so difficult?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Oh, I didn't mean you, boy." Snape rose, while Harry scrunched back in his chair, farther away. But the professor merely turned his back on Harry and adjusted a few glass containers on the shelves behind his desk. He continued doing so for several minutes, and it crossed Harry's mind that this might be a way that Snape covered his own nervousness. He dismissed the idea almost at once. Surely Professor Snape was never nervous.

Finally, Snape glanced over his shoulder, almost as if to see if Harry was still there. When he saw Harry was, he sighed again, and sat back down at his desk. He folded his hands on top of his desk and peered at Harry through his curtain of hair. "Did your uncle ever hit you, Harry?"

"What? No!"

"Did your aunt?"

"No!" Harry crossed his arms over his chest. "Why're you asking me stuff like that?"

"Do not be so quick to answer," Snape said, still using the quiet tone he seemed to have adopted for this talk. "You had numerous injuries when you first came to school, do you not remember? Contusions in various stages of healing, broken bones that had not been set correctly, and internal damage to some of your organs. Never mind the malnutrition, we'll get to that." When Harry opened his mouth to angrily retort that the Dursleys had done nothing, absolutely nothing, Snape held up his hand to silence him. "From your essay, it is quite clear they were emotionally abusive and criminally negligent at the very least, with regards to your safety and well being. . . . I need to know if your aunt and uncle were physically abusive as well."

Panicking slightly, Harry leapt out of his seat. His breaths came harder as he tried to decide if he should make a run for it. This was crazy! He hadn't said anything like that in his essay! Sure, his aunt and uncle had told him he should never have been born, and that he was worthless, but that didn't mean he actually was or anything. To

his shame, his voice cracked as he yelled, "Why do want to know stuff like that? Why can't you just leave me alone!?"

Professor Snape merely lifted an eyebrow at his outburst, and then, to Harry's surprise, answered him fully. "I want to know, Harry, so I can best decide if you need to be removed, permanently, from their care. And I cannot leave you alone, ethically, not when I am in a position to aid you."

Harry shook his head and backed toward the door. That wasn't true; it wasn't. No one could "aid" him. No one ever had before. And if they said they were, it was only because they had some trick up their sleeves, and he would get into even more trouble than if they'd just let him be! He knew how the world worked. Snape was like everyone else, just trying to trick him, just like always.

"I don't believe you," Harry told him, and in a flash, he had the door open, and was running down the corridor and far, far away.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! Happy Almost New Year. Peppermint mochas all around!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 32

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Not mine. I imagine I'll get over it.

Previously:

"I don't believe you," Harry told him, and in a flash, he had the door open, and was running down the corridor and far, far away.

"Damn," Snape snarled, and before the boy got more than a dozen steps, he was out of his chair and heading after him. He'd thought briefly of locking the door before Harry made it through, but he knew that was more likely to make the boy panic than anything. Still, he should have put himself between Harry and the door, to cut down on the possibility of the boy bolting. In this state of mind, Harry was liable to get himself into trouble.

Just before he left the office, he remembered something, and went back to his desk to grab the packet of photos he had promised to show Harry. He meant to keep that promise, even if Harry thought he was an evil bastard who wasn't actually trying to help him.

As he chased after the boy, he reflected on what exactly had gone wrong. He had needed to ask this series of questions a number of times before, and though there were differences in each child he tried to help, there were many similarities in their cases as well, one of which was almost an automatic reflexive denial of any problem. He was actually rather amazed that Harry had not accused him of making everything up whole cloth, including the injuries he'd had healed at the Infirmary at the beginning of the year. In his experience, children who were neglected and abused -- and he'd dealt with plenty in his tenure as the Slytherin Head of House -- were some of the least trusting and most paranoid people in the world. Severus had been one himself, so he was fairly confident of his interpretation.

But he had the unofficial testimony of his Legilimency of the Dursleys themselves. He certainly had not seen everything they had done to Harry, but he had a pretty good basis to charge them with a number

of crimes against the child. What he really needed was for Harry to corroborate what Severus had seen in their minds, with his own words.

For the next quarter hour, Severus trailed after the boy, all the way to the owlery. His leg -- despite having been mostly healed from his run in with that thrice-damned three-headed dog -- was aching fiercely by the time he reached the top of the West Tower. The owlery was cold and drafty this November evening, as the weather this past week had turned particularly nasty. Frost rimed the grounds every morning, and turned the surrounding hills a dark, steel gray.

In the frigid owlery, Severus immediately cast a warming charm on his clothes as he peered around for the boy. In the dark, one little dark haired boy in dark robes was not easy to spot. But one white owl was, and Severus honed in on the bird, recalling that Harry had one like it.

Half turned from the door, the boy was standing quite close to his owl, stroking her feathers gently. Severus, however, could see the lines of tension running through him as if they were painted on, in every jerky movement of his hand, in every hitched breath, and even in the cant of his head. Severus was going to need to approach the subject of his abuse much more slowly than he had previously considered. From the candidness with which the boy wrote his essay, Severus had thought he was ready to talk about his home life. Clearly, he was not.

Or . . . perhaps he could only talk to his owl about it. Harry's soft voice was barely more than a whisper, but Severus had not been a spy for nothing. He picked out the boy's words over the low murmurs of owls settling and the rustle of feathers.

". . . supposed to do, Hedwig. They always knew when I told anyone anything. Was always worse after. This was before I had you, you know, but I got locked in for weeks, once, after the school nurse made a fuss. She said . . ." He shook his head and ran a hand across his face. Wiping away tears? "I just . . . I don't think I can go back to the cupboard again. God, I was so hungry . . . And where would you go? I can't ask you to stay locked in that stupid little cupboard with

me." Seemingly talked out, the boy sighed and rested his head on his arm, which leant on the perch Hedwig was standing on.

But Severus had heard enough. "Harry," he said quietly, so as not to spook the boy.

Harry spooked anyway, rearing back. His green eyes were luminous in the dim chamber. "Please," he begged. "Please, sir, just leave me alone."

"I can't do that," Severus told him, again and moved a step closer. He took it as a small victory that the boy did not back away fearfully as he had half expected. "You are my responsibility, just like the rest of my Slytherins. I need to make sure you are all right."

"I'm fine!" Harry swallowed and repeated in a quieter voice, "I'm fine, sir. Honest."

Severus nodded slowly, and took another step. "Right now you are, yes."

"I'm fine all the time. Just . . . you don't know me, or anything about me! Don't pretend you do."

"All right. I won't. You have told me a few things about yourself, however, and I'll make whatever presumptions I care to from that." Harry had no knowledge of what Severus had seen in his relatives' minds, and Severus did not mean to tell him so, not now at any rate. He paused, reached into a pocket of his robes, and pulled out the packet of photos, but did not hold them out. They made perfect bait. "I brought those pictures of your mother; you ran out of my office so quickly, you didn't get a chance to see them."

Harry licked his lips, and stared at the packet as if it were Merlin's wand itself. Such hope shone on his face that it made Severus heart sick. "I . . . I can still see 'em?"

He inclined his head very slightly. "Yes, of course. If you come downstairs, back to my office. I am certainly not going to stand about in the cold, with mouse carcasses underfoot."

Ostentatiously considering the offer, though Severus knew what the boy would say, so clearly was it written in his eyes, Harry's gaze flicked from the packet of photos to the door to the owlery, to Severus' face, and back to the photos. Finally, as if he had needed to be persuaded, he said, "I just . . . just want to look at the pictures, all right? No . . . no other stuff. I don't want to talk about any of that, erm, what-all you said before."

"Very well." Slowly, like a tiger creeping up on its prey; he would go very slowly with this boy. "Come along then." He retreated from the owlery, knowing Harry would follow.

Back in his office, Severus sat behind his desk and rubbed his leg surreptitiously while Harry warmed his hands by the fireplace. Damned dog. He knew the boy had seen him limping, but he refused to acknowledge any such thing, since the bloody canine was meant to be a secret.

With a wave of his wand, he moved the chair the boy generally sat in so it was on the same side of the desk as he, so they could look at the photos together. It was not that he did not trust the boy not to damage them, but Severus wanted to make sure he could explain them, lend context if necessary as they perused them.

When he called the boy over, Harry took in the seating arrangement without comment, his body tight with barely contained expectation. As Harry seated himself, Severus removed the photos -- many of them Muggle made, with no movement or life to them at all, but no less precious for that -- from the packet and placed them on the surface of his desk.

The top one depicted a young Lily and Severus sitting, both cross-legged, out in the Evans' backyard by their old oak tree. Her long red locks had been caught by a swirl of breeze and teased into her eyes. She had one hand up, trying to tuck a few strands of hair behind her ear. Her lips were quirked into a tiny smile as she regarded Severus, whose face, like always, had been half hidden by his own hair.

"This one was taken by her father," Severus said by way of explanation. "We were about ten years old at the time."

Harry reached out, and did not touch the picture, but ran his fingers just over the surface of the paper instead. His mouth was slightly agape, as if he were startled to see his mother and professor together, despite what Severus had told him on Saturday. "Where is this?"

"Her parents' back yard." He pointed at the lower left corner of the picture. "The house is just off there. We didn't spend much time at her house, but sometimes." Severus hesitated then continued, wanting to -- needing to -- build up a rapport with this boy. "Her parents were very kind. They encouraged me to come over whenever I liked."

Harry glanced up at him, though he kept his head bent, the result being he looked through his lashes, like he was too shy to look at him head on. "Did she ever go to your house?" he asked softly.

Severus shook his head.

"Why?"

For a long moment, Severus debated telling the boy to mind his own business, but then, wasn't he minding the boy's? "My parents were . . . not kind like hers."

Harry nodded almost sagely, and returned his gaze to the picture.

Severus lifted that picture away to reveal the next, this one a wizarding photo, but just of Lily. She was crouched by the lake at Hogwarts, picking up stones and weighing them. "First year," Severus offered. Lily had borrowed the school camera so she could show her parents what Hogwarts was like, and Severus had taken this picture of Lily for them, but kept it for himself instead. They had enjoyed a picnic lunch that brisk autumn day, just the two of them, alone together for the first time since they arrived at Hogwarts. His throat tightened with the memory. "Fairly soon after we'd arrived. Late September, maybe."

"What's my Mum doing?" Harry asked, his voice subdued, as if he realized how much this trip through memories cost his professor.

Severus managed a slight smile. "Lily liked skipping stones along the surface of the water, any water. The lake, here, or the pond near where we grew up. Even along the river, though that posed more of a challenge. She was always looking for the perfect skipping stone."

With a little smile of his own, Harry's fingers again made that abortive movement to touch the photo, as if he could not help himself. But then, he probably had no memory of ever being touched by his mother, and his instincts called out for him to reach for her now. "She's awful pretty."

"Yes," Severus agreed. "She was."

When Lily stood, rock in hand, and faced the camera, Harry's breath caught. "Her eyes . . . my eyes are just like hers."

Severus nodded in silent agreement.

They looked through several more of the photos, but it was getting late. Also, Severus wanted to hoard what bait he had, to lure Harry to come to speak to him more in the future, so he wrapped up this session, telling the boy to go to bed.

For the first time, Severus caught a real spark of rebellion in Harry's eyes, and he imagined Harry wanted to call him out on his promise and rail about the unfairness of it all. But the spark was extinguished fairly quickly as Severus raised an eyebrow at him. Severus had promised pictures. Just not all the pictures. Thus, Harry acquiesced without saying anything more than, "Yes, sir. Thank you for showing me these."

"You're welcome, Potter. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Severus watched Harry go, not surprised to see his faithful Baron appear next to him like a guard dog as he went out the door. Drawing

a deep and even breath, he carefully returned his most prized possessions to their paper sleeve before locking them away once more. Just looking at her hurt, though less so than the last time he had indulged in such a maudlin activity. Perhaps because he shared them with her son.

The next few days passed swiftly, as they usually did this time of year, once the students finally settled into their routine. With the first Quidditch match of the season approaching, Slytherin versus Gryffindor, none of the Quidditch team -- especially their youngest and newest member -- had time for much of anything but practicing. Thus, Harry had not returned to Severus' office to look at pictures, though he mentioned at the end of class on Friday that he would like to, if he could, come back over the weekend to see more of them.

"Possibly," Severus told him with a casual air, though he knew he'd let the boy come look at photos whenever he wanted. "Do you not need to catch up on your classes because of Quidditch?"

"Oh, no, sir. Captain Flint's been making sure I got all my work done. Said you'd skin him and me, if he let . . ." Harry winced as if he'd just realized what he was saying, and looked away quick. "I didn't mean to say that."

But Severus only smirked at him. "I daresay Mr. Flint is right. Good for you for keeping up in your studies."

From the expression on the boy's face, you'd think Severus had handed him the moon, instead of a tiny compliment. "Th-thank you, sir."

"Go on with you, now. I believe Mr. Flint has a practice scheduled in about fifteen minutes, does he not?"

Harry jumped from his seat and nodded. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!"

The next day was the first game of the season, and Severus made sure all his Snakes were suitably enthusiastic and ready to root for their team. He also made sure all the players had breakfast. Unmoved by attacks of nerves that made many of the players want to

skip the meal, Severus insisted they eat. Quidditch matches early in the year had been known to go on for hours, through lunch and sometimes dinner, and he wanted no one fainting in the air from lack of food. Since both Harry Potter and the Gryffindor Seeker -- a Kenneth Towler or Towelboy or something -- were new to their teams, it was likely to be a long match as both of them settled into their roles.

At precisely half ten, Severus led the Slytherins down to the pitch, where he left them with their prefects while he went to sit in the Professors' stands. The team had gone ahead an hour before, to suit up and go over last minute strategies and pep talks. Several of Potter's friends amongst the First Years had made a banner which read, POTTER FOR PRESIDENT. One of them had charmed the paint to change color from silver to green and back again. Quite clever, those wee firsties.

At five to eleven, the teams marched onto the field. Potter, Severus noted, looked a trifle pale, but had a firm grip on his Nimbus 2000. He knew when the boy caught sight of the banner, as Potter took a half step back and then gave a wavering smile and stood straighter. Severus shook his head. Quidditch players were all alike.

Down on the field, Rolanda Hooch was giving her pre-game talk, which was usually some iteration of "Play fair," and which Slytherins inevitably translated to "Don't get caught." As usual, she eyed Marcus Flint a little more closely than the Gryffindor captain. Severus sneered at the blatant prejudice.

Then she gave a loud blast on her silver whistle. Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor -- what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too --"

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."()

Naturally, the announcer was a Gryffindor -- no chance of prejudicial commenting there -- and a friend of those blasted Weasley boys. And so, naturally, his commentary focused almost exclusively on the Gryffindor team and their possession of the Quaffle, their accuracy with Bludgers, their Seeker's attention to finding the Snitch. No matter that the Slytherin Seeker was clearly the better flier, with a better eye and on a far better broom.

Severus was disgusted by McGonagall's one-up-manship attitude, evidenced by her choice of commentator. He was aggravated. Annoyed. Peeved, even. He let none of that show on his face, however, in true Slytherin style, and attempted to enjoy the game regardless. And he would have succeeded, too, if someone had not nearly killed Harry Potter in the middle of it.

Gryffindor had scored once, much to the dismay of one quarter of the fans watching, when the Snitch was spotted for the first time. Potter sped towards it, going into a steep dive. He inched ahead of Towelson, who had also spotted the little ball of gold. Then, in a move that was obviously choreographed, the Weasley menaces planted themselves directly in Potter's path, angled so he would have to pull a hard turn at top speed or else careen into one of them. Potter nearly couldn't make the turn in time, and the end of his broom was clipped by one of the red haired oafs, spinning him briefly out of control.

Flint automatically complained to Hooch, but she shook her head, not allowing a foul shot, despite the clear violation.

Damned anti-Slytherin bias.

Another Bludger flew dangerously close to Potter's head when it happened. The boy's broom -- a perfectly fine, well-designed, brand new, top of the line Nimbus 2000, as his purse strings well knew -- gave a heart-stopping lurch. At least, Severus' heart nearly stopped when he saw it. Potter was high enough in the sky that not everyone was watching his every move. But then, not everyone was Severus Snape, who had made an oath to protect the boy, Slytherin or not. Thus, not everyone gasped as Harry grabbed hold of his broom with both hands, and wrapped his legs tight around the end of it, with a look of pure panic on his face.

The broom bucked again, nearly throwing Harry off. More gasps were heard as more people noticed the boy and broom zigzagging through the air, the latter making violent jerks as if actively trying to send the boy into a free fall above the pitch. Meanwhile, the broom went higher and higher, to where a fall would be more likely to be fatal. Suddenly the broom rolled over, and over again, like a barrel, then gave a powerful jerk. Harry was now hanging on by one hand, dangling over the pitch and scrabbling to get back up.

So someone else, besides Severus, must have been watching the boy very closely, because someone was hexing the broom. Someone powerful with Dark magic.

A feral growl came from Severus' throat. No one messed with his Snakes.

He began chanting a counter curse, keeping his unblinking gaze on the boy and the broom. Whoever was cursing the broom would need maintain that continuous eye contact, too. And hopefully some other Professor -- he could not imagine a mere student would have the know how or experience with such Dark magic to know how to counter it -- would discover the malfeasant and bring him down. All Severus could do was try and mitigate the curse; he could not banish it entirely.

He heard screams around him as more people realized their bloody savior was in danger of dying. Above him, Harry managed to latch onto the broom with his other hand at last -- no thanks to the two Weasleys, who flew in underneath him, as if to catch him if he fell, but offered no other assistance.

And then, Severus smelled smoke.

Fire!?

Quirinus Quirrell lurched against him from behind, screeching about being on fire, of all things. As Severus fought to regain his balance, he lost sight of Harry for a mere second, the space of a heartbeat, or

as long as it would take for his to stop completely. When he was upright again, he looked to the sky, fearing the worst.

Instead of being quite dead, the imp hurtled toward the ground, right side up finally, on a broom completely under his control, and nearly went for a tumble a few feet above the earth. He clapped his hand over his mouth as if he were going to be sick, and when he hit the ground, he landed on all fours. He coughed -- rather inelegantly, truth be told -- and out of the Brat Who Lived to Give Severus Heart Failure's mouth popped the little golden Snitch.

Merlin's Balls.

Severus' scowl was just this side of a smirk, in light of Slytherin's victory. The boy couldn't even play a simple game of Quidditch without making a spectacle of himself.

But at least he wasn't dead.

And Severus had yet another piece of damning evidence to stack against one stuttering, blundering DADA professor.

If only Dumbledore would listen this time.

TBC . . .

A/N: The four paragraphs (mostly dialogue) just before the () were lifted in their entirety from The Philosopher's Stone.

Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! Hope this chapter makes y'all happy; hated to leave you in the lurch, cliffie-wise. Peppermint mochas (or eggnog, if you're not a caffeineaholic like me) all around!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 33

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Waaaah! None of this is mine!

Warning: for language and innuendo

Previously:

And then, Severus smelled smoke.

Fire!?

Quirinus Quirrell lurched against him from behind, screeching about being on fire, of all things.

"You set Professor Quirrell on fire?!" Harry all but shrieked. They were in the common room, at their favorite table for studying quietly, but the room was so full of celebrating Slytherins, you could not have heard an erumpent trumpet its horn.

"Shush," Teddy said anyway, at the same time as Millicent shrugged, not looking at all apologetic.

"Could have been worse," she said. "I could have lit his head on fire. That smelly turban desperately deserves it, too." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Besides, it got him to stop cursing your broom, didn't it?"

"Yeah . . . But, are you sure it was him?"

Teddy rolled his eyes. "Course it was. First of all, he's been trying to kill you all year, hasn't he? And also, he was staring right at you, without blinking. In order to carry out a sustained hex like that, you have to maintain eye contact. Uninterrupted. No blinking, no sneezing, no bending over to put out the flames on your robes."

Harry couldn't help it; he snickered. Though, when he'd been over a hundred feet in the air, his out of control broom had been anything but funny. Catching the Snitch, though, and winning the game . . . that had been the best feeling ever!

"I still can't believe they're not doing anything about him!" Millie growled.

"What do you mean?"

Teddy gave Millicent a sharp look before shrugging. "We saw Professor Snape talking with the Headmaster as everyone was leaving the stadium. The Professor looked furious, all pale except his lips which were white, he had them pressed so hard. You know The Look?"

Harry nodded dumbly, eyes wide. He'd seen that Look a couple of times. It usually heralded detention, and a raging dressing down.

"Yeah, well, I think he was angry with the Headmaster this time. I couldn't hear everything they said, but our Head of House was talking about Quirrell and how you'd almost died again and how the Headmaster better tighten up security, both on you and the you-know-what."

Huh? "What's a 'you-know-what'?"

"Damned if I know. Something they're trying to keep secret, anyway. And well-guarded." Teddy got a sly look and glanced around them to make sure none of their House mates had moved closer; they hadn't, the nearest ones were laughing their heads off a few strides away and couldn't have heard anything over the noise in the room. Even so, he lowered his voice, though not to a whisper. "Do you know why we're not allowed on the third floor corridor?"

"Peeves?" Harry guessed.

Teddy shook his head. "Cerberus."

"Serba-who?"

"Cerberus. A hell hound. Three heads, big teeth, nasty disposition."

Harry gaped at him. "A hell hound."

Teddy nodded.

"In the school."

Another nod.

"Why?"

"That's a good question. I think it's guarding something."

"Guarding what?"

Teddy wrinkled his nose a bit and sighed. "I don't know. But whatever it is -- and Hagrid, you know, the gamekeeper? He called it 'you-know-what' earlier today. Whatever it is, if the Headmaster wants it safe as much as he wants to protect you, then I imagine it's pretty important." He paused. "But the Professor was rather put out about Dumbledore being more interested in protecting the you-know-what than you."

Harry shook his head. It was too much. A three-headed hell hound was protecting something on the third floor, and the Headmaster was being less than helpful when it came to protecting Harry from the broom-cursing, murderous Quirrell.

"How d'you all this?" Harry asked, it being the only question he could wrap his mind around at the moment.

"He's very sneaky," Millicent said. "Sneakier than my big brother, and that's saying something." Teddy gave her a bland smile, and she continued, "And he eavesdrops."

"Give away all my secrets, why don't you."

"Right," Millie huffed. "As if you aren't gloating right now 'cause you know things no one else does."

"You know . . ." Harry said quietly, "I bet that's why Snape was limping."

"What?" asked Millie.

"When?" asked Teddy.

"Recently," Harry answered. "I really saw he was hurt on, um, Monday night," he didn't tell them about his trip to the owlery or the pictures Snape had shared; it was too personal. "But I think he'd been that way since Halloween."

"He didn't get hurt by the troll," Millicent pointed out. "No one did, not even Quirrell."

"No," Harry agreed. "But what if he had to check up on the cerberus?"

Millie rolled her eyes. "Why would anyone 'check up' on a three-headed hell hound?"

"Because they needed to make sure what whatever it's protecting is safe."

Harry nodded at Teddy. "And the troll . . ."

"Was just a distraction. So Quirrell could get his hands on whatever is being safeguarded, while the professors were all off chasing the troll."

"What are you two going on about?" Millicent crossed her arms over her chest. "Is this some sort of conspiracy theory?"

Harry was going to ask what she meant by that when a group of fourth and fifth years crowded the table, congratulating Harry on his first Quidditch win.

"Glad you didn't swallow, kid," said a boy who Harry didn't know, except that he was a fifth year. "Spittin's way better . . ." He smirked. "For Snitches, anyway."

"Shut up, Gaius," said a girl as she punched Gaius' arm. "Honestly. He's only eleven." The others Slytherins around them were laughing, though, and Harry smiled a little. The alternative was to appear stupid in front of older -- and much bigger -- students.

Gaius slung an arm around Harry's shoulders and squeezed the far one while he hugged Harry's body to his side. Harry managed -- barely -- not to twist away, but he did become very still. "Potter's cool with it, Darcy. He knows what's what. Doncha, kid?"

"Sure," Harry agreed; pretending he understood was almost always better than admitting ignorance.

"So tell me, Potter, you gonna win us the cup?" Gaius asked, his lips twisted in an almost leer, making Harry want to get away from him even more.

"Yeah, 'course," Harry said. "If I can."

"Of course he will," Millicent agreed. "Did you see him fly? Even when his broom was all hexed up." She grinned at Harry, eyes shining. "Amazing."

Harry ducked his head at her compliment, and used the motion to duck out from under Gaius' arm. From the smirk and wink Gaius gave him, Harry knew his method of getting away had not been subtle. Not particularly caring, Harry just hunched his shoulders and looked away.

The group chatted loudly, laughing and even chanting out Slytherin Team Quidditch slogans, for another quarter hour before Millicent rose from her seat at the table. "Almost time for dinner, guys. Harry, I gotta show you something first, okay?"

As Harry got up to follow, Gaius made some other comment, under his breath so Harry could not hear, but the fifth year's friends collapsed into laughter.

Frowning and feeling his face warming, though he could not have said why, Harry trailed after Millicent and Teddy to the first year boys' dorm. The snickering continued on behind him, until he had the door shut to close out their voices.

"What's up, Millie?" he asked, noting that Teddy was scowling, too.

"Watch out for him, Harry," she said.

"Why? What's . . . is he dangerous?"

"He could be," said Teddy, who then bit his lip briefly before letting it go. "His father was a supporter of You Know Who."

"So . . . you think he's angry about that?" Harry didn't think Gaius looked angry, more . . . like a predator. The look in his eyes had made Harry very uncomfortable, and the spot when Gaius had squeezed his arm felt like he had been burned. He didn't like it when people touched him. All his life -- or all of it he could remember, anyway -- being touched by someone usually meant pain. Dudley and his gang only touched him with fists and kicks, and his aunt and uncle never touched him at all if they could help it. If they did, it was usually just to throw him into his cupboard or push him out the door. No one had ever hugged him or even just shaken his hand until he met Hagrid. Thus he felt well within his rights to be suspicious of anyone who was physically close to him. And besides, Gaius had just been creepy.

Teddy shook his head. "I don't think so. But he might be looking for some means of revenge. I knew him, sort of, while we were growing up. He's friends with one of my cousins. He doesn't get mad, he gets even."

Great, Harry thought as he scratched absently at his scar. Some crazy psychopath had tried to kill him when he was a baby, got himself destroyed instead, and Harry was made out to be the bad guy by the psycho's followers. He just didn't get it.

"Hey, it's all right," Millie said and gave Harry a reassuring smile. He noted that she respected his space and almost never crowded him; certainly never touched him. He liked it much better that way. "We'll keep a close eye out for ya, Harry."

With a wry smile for his friend, Harry sighed. "Looks like I've got all kinds of body guards, eh? Wish I could just figure out some way to protect myself so I didn't have to look over my shoulder all the time."

"Yeah," Teddy said, as a pensive look stole across his face. "That would be helpful."

Harry wondered what new project -- sneaky or not -- Teddy was coming up with now, and if it would involve anyone getting hexed.

The next day, Harry was in Snape's office again. After Harry admitted that his friends -- though he was careful not to name names -- had been the ones to stop Quirrell's broom cursing with a bit of well-placed fire, Snape was gracious enough to say they would not be punished for saving Harry's life, and in the same breath, he told Harry that he had been the one trying to counter the curse.

"What's the Headmaster going to do about Quirrell, sir?"

Snape swore -- softly -- then stomped around his office for the next ten minutes, in a very un-Snapelike manner, while glaring balefully at various potion ingredients.

Head down, and wondering why Snape was so upset, Harry remained still until Snape returned to his desk, whereupon he did not ask again about the Headmaster, but said, "Can I see more pictures, sir?"

Peering at him through narrowed eyes and sneering, Snape nodded. "But let us make an arrangement, Harry. One that will be mutually beneficial."

Immediately suspicious, Harry cleared his expression so as to give nothing away. That was the best way to get the best deal. Millie often

said he would be a great poker player. "What kind of arrangement, Professor?"

Snape's thin lips turned up slightly at one corner. "You want to see pictures of your mother." He paused, and Harry realized he wanted confirmation.

"Yes, sir." Desperately, like an itch he could not scratch, like an empty ache in his chest, a hole the size of his heart.

Snape nodded. "And I want answers -- honest, complete answers -- to my questions. I suggest we agree on some sort of trade off. Therefore, I will show you one picture for every twelve questions you answer."

Harry had almost been expecting that. One thing he had been learning from his Slytherin House mates was that very little in life came without a price attached, and he was willing to make some kind of trade, in truth. But a dozen questions for one picture! Completely mad. Keeping his face blank, Harry shook his head. "How about one for one? That seems fair."

Snape lifted an eyebrow, but Harry was almost certain he could detect a gleam of amusement in the dark depths of the professor's eyes. "Alas for you, Mr. Potter, life is not fair." Snape laid his hands on the desk in front of him and leaned back in his chair. "Ten questions per photo."

"Two."

"Be reasonable, Mr. Potter. This is information I could simply delve in your mind to discover, or order you to give me."

But he wouldn't, Harry knew, and then he wondered why. Maybe Snape didn't want to force Harry to spill his secrets. He worried his lip a bit, trying to figure Snape out.

"Six questions per photo," Snape said into the silence, "plus at least one hour, given within a week's time, assisting me in the preparation of ingredients for my lessons."

Harry, abandoning his blank look, opened his mouth in shock, then closed it with a snap. It was almost like a compliment, that Snape would want him to prepare ingredients with him. As though he thought Harry would do a good job at it or something. Almost smiling, he countered with, "Two questions plus that hour."

"Four plus an hour." The professor's lip twitched; he was definitely amused now.

Harry considered the offer for a moment, but he wanted to avoid the questions entirely if possible. "How about two hours of potions work and no questions?" he offered hopefully.

"I will not agree to any arrangement that lacks you answering questions as part of the exchange." Snape paused as Harry drew a breath and acknowledged fact with a tiny nod. Then he suggested, "Two questions and two hours."

Harry figured that was as good a deal as he was likely to get. He bargained the professor from twelve questions down to two, after all, and felt almost jubilant as a result. "All right. Two questions and two hours per photo."

Snape inclined his head. "Very well. Wait here." He went through a concealed door at the back of his office and returned a few minutes later with that same paper packet he'd had last Monday.

Something quivered low in Harry's gut. Pure anticipation and excitement. He was going to see his Mum again. He didn't care if Snape was in every picture, or they were taken at Hogwarts or at his grandparents' home, in Diagon Alley or on the moon. He just wanted to see his Mum. As Snape removed the photos from the packet, Harry drew a shuddering breath.

He had been able to think of little else -- except for Quidditch -- for the last week. The pictures he had seen on Monday of his Mum had filled a tiny corner of the gaping hole he had in his chest, the emptiness he harbored where memories of his parents should be. He wished, more than anything else in his life, ever, that he had been given a chance

to know his Mum and Dad. He wished there had been no Voldemort, no Killing Curse, and no need for the Dursleys in his life.

As all his wishes bubbled to the surface of his mind, Harry drew another breath, this one to steady himself. He could not let the professor see his emotions so out of control, and he had to turn his face away until he felt calmer.

Snape laid the first picture flat on his desk. "Come around this side, Harry," he said, and his voice held that same calm and oddly . . . caring tone he had used the night he followed Harry to the owlery. And he had used Harry's given name, which he did not do very often, and never in front of other people. In fact, usually only when they were discussing difficult things, or when Snape was apologizing for something.

Harry moved his chair around to Snape's side of the desk and his gaze went immediately to the photo. Snape slid it closer to Harry, so he could get a better look. His Mum, in her Hogwarts uniform with the addition of a dark blue jumper and matching knit hat, stood in one of the larger courtyards of the school. She leaned against one of the columns covered with winter ivy and cradled a book in her arms, her head bent over the pages. A light dusting of snow skirled around her feet in miniature cyclones. As Harry drank in every detail, she looked up from her book and grinned at him. Her green eyes sparkled. Coughing her book against her chest with one arm, she waved at him, then tucked a long strand of her auburn hair behind her ear.

Harry's chest tightened; he could barely breathe.

She appeared older than in the other pictures Snape had shown him; he would guess she was in third or fourth year in this one.

"Did you take the picture?" he asked Snape after a few minutes of staring hungrily at the image.

Snape nodded. "This was a bit before winter break in our third year." The professor cleared his throat, and Harry wondered if Snape was as choked by emotions as Harry was. "She wanted more pictures to show her parents."

"Was she . . . did she go home for the hols then?"

"Yes, of course."

Harry nodded, his face growing warm with shame. Of course. His Mum's parents had probably still loved their daughter, even though they didn't have magic and she did. Not like Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon, who would be just as glad if he never came back. No wonder their daughter got to go home for holidays, though: they wanted her.

He watched his Mum read a bit more from whatever book she held, then glance up to grin cheekily at him a few more times. Once, she even spun in place, her robe billowing out like the bottom of a bell as she laughed and laughed. She looked so happy.

Wanting -- somehow -- to have her recognize him, acknowledge him as her son, Harry reached toward the picture as she finished spinning. He wanted to talk to her like he could with the Bloody Baron, or with the portraits of people long dead and gone that covered the halls of Hogwarts. After all, she was smiling at him.

"Mum," he called and put his face close to the surface of the picture. "Mum, it's Harry, your son. Mum! Can you hear me?"

She didn't react at all, and when Snape touched Harry's forearm with his pale, slender fingers, Harry jerked his hand back from the photograph. "She can't hear you, Harry," Snape said quietly. "She's not really there."

Harry swallowed down his disappointment. "I . . . I know." He turned his face away. "Sorry."

"It's all right." Snape paused. "It's a common mistake for people new to the Wizarding world."

Harry gave a jerky nod, but could not bring himself to look at the picture again.

"Would you like me to put this away now? Or do you want to see another one?"

Harry nibbled his lip, considering. He wanted to see them all, but if he did it right now, he feared the pain would overwhelm him. Seeing just one was already making his eyes burn and his chest ache, and he didn't think he could take more tonight. "I . . . I'm done. I think."

Snape nodded again and put the small stack of pictures back into the packet. "I will ask the two questions tonight. Your two hours of assisting me you will have to schedule, but they should be completed prior to next Sunday.

Glad to hear Snape's back-to-business voice, even though it meant he now had to answer questions, Harry said, "Yes, sir." He clasped his hands together tightly on top of the desk as if he were bracing himself. "I'm ready."

"You know, Potter," Snape said, sounding almost irritated, "I'm not going to hurt you with my questions."

"Beg your pardon, sir," Harry replied, clenching his hands tighter, "but you don't know that." He glanced up at the professor's face and met his dark, fathomless eyes head on.

They stared at each other for several long moments before Snape gave a miniscule nod. "My apologies, Harry. You are correct. How about, I will do my best not to hurt you." He paused. "And you will tell me if I have failed. Agreed?"

"All right," Harry agreed, though he didn't know if he could do that, in truth. "I'll try, sir."

"Thank you. That's all I can ask." He smirked. "Except for two other things." Harry gazed at him expectantly, until Snape finally said, "First question: Why don't you want to go home for winter hols?"

Harry had not said that he didn't, but he figured Snape was drawing on what Harry had asked before, about his Mum. But it wasn't fair; Snape was skipping a much easier question to answer. Harry

considered making him ask that question first -- about whether he wanted to go to the Dursleys for the break or not -- but decided not to, less interested in having an argument than in just finishing this and going back to the dorms.

"There's no reason for me to," he answered after a moment.

"Explain." Harry narrowed his eyes and opened his mouth to ask if that was the second question, when the Professor cut him off. "I am not satisfied with that answer, as I do not find it complete. So explain why there is no reason for you to return home for the holidays."

Scowling now, Harry mumbled, "Okay. Fine." Hitching up one shoulder, he said, "I'm not allowed to be part of their holidays, except cooking for them and cleaning up afterwards, so I'd rather stay here than be their servant."

"What about on Solstice itself . . . or, I suppose as Muggles they celebrate Christmas."

"Yeah, they do." Harry shrugged, knowing next to nothing about Solstice. "But yeah, on Christmas, sometimes they let me out of my cupboard, my room, so I can finish cooking dinner for them. Sometimes they don't, though, so I get to spend all day in there, alone, listening to them having fun and all. I'd rather be at Hogwarts, where I'm pretty sure I'll at least get dinner."

"That would be a good assumption." Snape smiled a little as he said it, and somehow, the touch of humor made Harry feel a bit more comfortable to be talking to him. "What about presents? And yes, this is still part of question one."

"Presents?" Harry frowned. "What about them?"

"Won't you miss out on getting gifts from your family?"

Harry actually laughed, terribly amused by Snape's inadvertent joke. "No," he said, still chuckling a minute later. "They never give me anything. First present I ever got was on my birthday this year. Hagrid gave me a cake when he brought my Hogwarts letter, and then he

gave me Hedwig when we got my school supplies in Diagon Alley." He chanced a look at Snape's face. The man did not show surprise or pity or any of that, and Harry was glad.

"Oh, wait!" Harry added a moment later, continuing to hold the man's gaze. "I did get a present for Christmas once." The day he started primary school, he had been promised a gift if he was very, very good until Christmas. He went for months not questioning any orders, and never talking back, hardly talking at all, in fact. He worked for hours every night after school doing chores to make up for the fact that he wasn't home during the day, and that was only after he did Dudley's homework. He was allowed to do his own homework after he finished the chores. During those four months, he never dared to ask for food or challenge any mean thing Dudley said about him or his dead parents, and he never complained when Dudley and his gang chased him or beat him up. He had been so good, and so looking forward to getting his present he'd been practically frantic with anticipation on Christmas morning.

Shaking his head, Harry shook off those old memories. His voice was quiet and lacking any emotion when he said, "I got a clothes hanger."

He never trusted anything they promised him, after that.

TBC . . .

A/N: Happy New Year, y'all! Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! Donations are accepted here for the Hug-a-Harry fund. Just drop off your hugs for that most huggable (and needing of hugs) wizard-boy, Harry, and they will be delivered directly to his door as soon as possible. Be the first on your (ISP) block to give!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 34

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Waaaah! None of this is mine!

Previously:

Shaking his head, Harry shook off those old memories. His voice was quiet and lacking any emotion when he said, "I got a clothes hanger."

He never trusted anything they promised him, after that.

Severus watched the play of emotions over Harry's face -- far fewer than he may have expected from an average child, but far more than he was growing to expect from Harry; the boy had a better blank face than almost anyone else he knew -- and he considered what the boy was not saying. There was obviously a lot more to that story, than, 'I got a present once, it was a hanger.' The pause between his two statements, for one thing, and the bright, brief glint of grief in his expressive green eyes.

Not to mention the question that had led up to this admission. As Head of Slytherin, he had at least one or two children a year who did not want to go home for holidays, as Harry obviously did not. The reason they gave was almost universal at its core, that they were not wanted at home.

Neglect was one of the more insidious forms of abuse he came up against, and one of the most difficult for him to combat in children who were already age eleven when they first reached his demense. The main problem, of course, was that children subjected since infancy to such profound neglect often grew up believing there was nothing wrong with the treatment they endured in their homes. Because they were not being hit, usually, it was easier for these children to believe their lives were not so bad, or that their guardians treated them normally, since they were taught they did not deserve to be noticed, cared for, or loved by those who were supposed to do so.

Harry had all the classic signs of this kind of neglect, but while the aunt and uncle had not abused him physically, seemingly content to pretend he did not exist at all, when they weren't telling him he was useless and worthless, he had just as obviously been routinely assaulted by his slug of a cousin and the slug's cohort at their school. The boy had the worst of both worlds.

For instance, Harry's simple statement about his one Christmas present told Severus far more about his home environment than the boy could possibly know. Severus did not know what his pregnant pause had been about -- there was much more to that story, for certain -- and he could ask for clarification now and get the whole story if he wanted. He still had one question, after all.

But Harry was currently staring back at him, holding his gaze unashamedly, to Severus' surprise. These kinds of questions about one's home-life -- and this was by no means the first deal Severus had made with a Slytherin to get those questions answered -- usually resulted in a lot of head hanging and averted gazes. Yet, he had known for some while that this boy had less fear, as well as less of a sense of self-worth, than most others he had dealt with recently. It was troubling. How far had his guardians worn him down that he could continue to maintain his cool, blank mask about this particular episode, the memory of which would have reduced most children to tears?

Severus pursed his lips. What should he ask? Harry opened his mouth, but before the Brat Who Lived to Interrupt could get a word out, Severus said, "Next question."

As he hoped, the boy subsided and sat back in his chair, his expression still contained in that blank mask. "Yes, sir?"

Severus almost smiled. Harry was also almost unfailingly polite. Not that such an attitude would have done him much good at his relatives' house, but such manners had likely been drilled in him since infancy. Only its lack would have drawn attention, and not any good attention. But Severus did not smile. Instead, he kept his tone perfectly level as he said, "How are you getting along in our House?"

"All of it, sir? Or just with Firsties?"

"How much contact do you have with the upper years?" He would wager Harry had far more contact with Slytherin Uppers than most other Firsties, because of whose curse he had survived when he was fifteen months old, among other reasons.

"Not much." The boy's forehead wrinkled as he considered. "Quidditch team . . . mostly . . ."

Obviously, Severus knew, as Harry averted his gaze after his hesitation, he was recalling at least one other interaction. But Severus did not call him on it, and merely waved at him to continue.

"I get along okay."

If the Brat thought he'd get away with that, he must have been Confunded. "Elaborate."

"Me and Teddy and Millicent are good friends."

"Mm." Severus had been bowled over to learn as much, in fact. But since then, he had seen the three students growing closer, spending much of their free -- and study -- time together. Not the trusting sort, he was keeping a close eye on the Nott boy, for obvious reasons. He doubted any son of Hiram Nott's would stand idly by -- or even less likely, attend -- while the Brat Who Sent the Dark Lord Scurrying continued to live and learn in the den of Snakes. So far, he had seen nothing incriminating, but he would not stop watching. Over a dozen years as a spy had ingrained that habit in him.

As had his promise to keep the boy safe.

As if he had gleaned some disbelief in Severus' expression, Harry defended his statement with an almost petulant, "They are. Teddy helped me figure out my Frogs weren't cursed. And Millie's always standing up for me against the upper years."

Severus raised one eyebrow. "Cursed frogs?"

Without objecting to the additional question, Harry smiled wryly. "Well, they weren't cursed, were they. Was nice, really, Hermione -- from Gryffindor -- she gave me some Chocolate Frogs when I went to hospital." Another wry look. "Both times. But she didn't sign the card, so I didn't trust to try them."

Severus nodded, though he was surprised. Not many children would be so suspicious of sweets. If he let it, the fact that Harry was so suspicious, at his age, would have distressed him. "What did you try?" He managed to put a note of admiration in his tone, which often worked wonders with children who had rarely, if ever, been praised in their lives.

Harry grinned, looking pleased. Severus suppressed an answering smile, but he was glad to see one on the boy; they were rare enough. "First, of course, we tried Revelio and Finite Incantatem, which I'd read about before, but then Teddy taught me Ostendo Virum, the one where you look for poisons, and then one for specific curses. We did some research--"

"In the library?" Severus interrupted, eyes wide with mock incredulity.

The boy's grin turned cheeky. "Yes, sir."

"Please." Severus waved his hand. "Do go on."

"Very well," Harry said slowly, in a fair imitation of Severus' own tones, and Severus shook his head, a smile touching his lips at last. "So, we did research, sir, in the library, and then tried Quiest Vomica and . . ." He listed a few more diagnostic spells, rather enthusiastically, and Severus was duly impressed.

He decided to say as much. "I'm heartened by your thoroughness. You did far more than I would expect the average first year to do. Did you discover who sent the sweets?"

"Yeah! Er, I mean, yes, sir. By eliminating our own signatures, we figured out the magical signature of the one who'd sent the Frogs . . . and 'cause we had two samples, we were able to cross reference it to

make sure. Then I checked the signatures of a couple people I thought it might be, and found out it was 'Mione. I mean, Hermione Granger."

"Magical signatures? That's a fairly advanced bit of spellwork there. I believe it's taught in fourth year Charms."

The boy ducked his head at the perceived compliment. Severus waited till the tousled head came back up before he steered the conversation back to his question. "So, Mr. Nott assisted you with a project. You said Miss Bulstrode supports you in conflicts with other students . . ."

"Not conflicts, sir. Not really."

"No?"

"No."

"You're equivocating."

"I'm what?"

"Equivocating. Being deliberately ambiguous. There have been conflicts, but you do not wish to admit to, or dwell on them, perhaps?"

"Well . . ." Harry frowned lightly, drawing his lower lip between upper and lower teeth. Severus wanted to smear the peppery Salpician Potion on the boy's lips, to train him out of that habit before it was too ingrained. Such an obvious display of nervousness went against everything Slytherin. For the time being, though, he simply made a mental note to address the issue later. "I guess. I mean, no one gets along with everyone, right?"

"Correct. However, I believe some of your difficulties have less to do with you not getting along with everyone, and more to do with your history and the reason behind your fame." Severus was speculating wildly here, having not heard of any specific troubles coming out of his House, but he was well acquainted with human nature, especially when it came to his Snakes.

"My history . . . Oh. You mean because of Voldemort?"

Severus winced. "Do not say his name, Potter. Not in my presence."

"I . . ." Harry frowned a bit, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

Inclining his head, Severus pressed, "Your conflicts?"

Harry looked down at his hands. "Teddy's pointed out a couple kids whose parents were allied with Vol . . . er, with him, and I think there's a few others who don't like me because of that."

Severus could just imagine. Mr. Nott was a standout because he didn't seem to harbor resentment on behalf of his father. "What form does this dislike take?" he asked.

"Oh, er, just, like name-calling mostly. Nobody's ever beat me up or anything."

"I am glad to hear it."

"Except Professor Quirrell."

With a sigh, Severus nodded. "I know. I am trying my best to have him removed, but am running into unexpected obstacles."

"Like the Headmaster."

It wasn't a question, and Severus stared at the boy, boggled again by how well Harry seemed to appreciate the difficulties he was up against here at Hogwarts. "Indeed."

Harry nodded solemnly and his lip disappeared between his teeth again to be chewed for a few moments. Before Severus could admonish him for the behavior, he said, "Sir? Was the Headmaster the one who left me with the Dursleys?"

"Why do you ask?"

A corner of the boy's mouth quirked up. "Well, I figure, you're asking questions, so I could ask questions, too."

"That is an unwarranted assumption."

"Yes, sir." Harry hesitated, and Severus held his gaze. "Will you answer anyway?"

Severus considered the pros and cons of doing so. He would like to know what had brought Harry to ask the question in the first place. Did he believe the Headmaster, in refusing to get rid of Quirrell, was merely continuing the policy of being cavalier with his safety begun ten years ago, when he was left on the doorstep of those Muggles? Even more, though, he wanted to know what Harry would do with the answer to that question.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked again.

The corner of Harry's mouth lifted a bit further, into what could almost be a sneer. "If I told you I just wanted to know who to thank, you wouldn't tell me, would you?"

"Perhaps not." Severus leaned forward on his desk, to put additional weight on his words. "Revenge is not the end you should be seeking at this time."

"I'm not--"

"Listen!" He stared into the boy's emerald eyes. Harry must understand this. "There's an old saying: *La vengeance est un plat qui se mange froid*. 'Vengeance is a dish best served cold.' You are currently reaching an awareness that your life was not all it could have been. Between the Dark Lord, your relatives, and a few select others, what could have been an idyllic childhood was wrenched from you. You have suffered, yes. You are furious and frustrated and want someone to blame."

As Severus went on, he could see Harry tense. His hands clenched into fists, though he kept them in his lap. His shoulders were shaking from the strain. His eyes were green fire. Oh, yes, Severus' words

were striking home. He just hoped he could pull the boy back before he did anything horrendously Gryffindorish.

"In such a state," he said, in a low, clear tone that he had learned over the years was one that often mesmerized his students, "your thinking is impaired by such extremes of emotion. You will make mistakes. Thus, your revenge will never be as complete, nor as sweet as you want it to be. It cannot. You cannot fully appreciate the fruits of your efforts while still caught up in your rage and distress."

When Severus paused to let his words sink in, Harry nodded slowly. The fire in his eyes dampened to embers. "But when I've . . . cooled down?"

"At that time, you will be more in control."

For a long moment, Harry held Severus' gaze, but then he dropped his head to stare at his hands. His voice was soft, and void of emotion, as he said, "But I was right. Professor Dumbledore left me with them."

Severus let his silence answer for him. Then he sighed. "To be fair, you had no other family. And your godfather had just been imprisoned. There was nowhere else for you to go."

Harry's head came up with a jerk. "I have a godfather?!"

Severus barely kept himself from growling. "Yes."

The boy frowned at the enmity contained in that one word, and Severus winced. He obviously had still not cooled enough -- if he were to come across bloody Sirius Black from some inconceivable reason -- to enact his own revenge against that cur.

"Who is he?"

Severus shook his head.

"You don't know him? I thought you said--"

"I don't wish to discuss it!"

The damnable Brat cocked his head to the side and considered him like a Cerberus considered a steak . . . or a Potion Master's leg. Then he nodded slowly, again, his face taking on his blank mask once more, after all Severus had done to dismantle it this evening. "My apologies, Professor. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories."

"Never mind. Forget it."

"Yes, sir."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Are we done, sir?"

Without looking up, Severus said, "What form, besides name-calling, have your conflicts taken?"

As he had planned, the boy was enough taken aback by the swift change in subject to not hide his reaction. He shrugged and looked away. His shoulders hunched. But at least he did not deny such other incidents existed.

"Tell me."

"I'm not sure it even--"

"Just tell me."

The boy sighed, tucked his hands under his armpits, and if he could have, he probably would have drawn up his knees in front of his chest to protect himself further. He would not look at Severus. "There's, um, this guy who kinda . . . I dunno. He's, um . . . he touches me."

Severus stood up and took a long stride toward Harry without thinking. Touched him!? The boy was meant to be safe within their House! "Has he hurt you?"

Harry startled when Severus spoke, having not expected him to be so close. "No . . . I mean, he just . . . makes me real uncomfortable." One shoulder came up a bit higher. "I don't like it much when people touch me."

"That's understandable, Harry," he said softly. Children who had been neglected and/or abused were often averse to physical contact, along with having a high startle reflex. Harry's cheeks were well on the way to red, when Severus added, "And nothing to be ashamed of."

"I guess."

"Who was it?" Severus asked, still speaking quietly.

Harry shook his head.

"Tell me, Harry. Just like I want to know whenever you have pain in your scar, or interaction with Professor Quirrell that affects you negatively, or even debilitating nightmares, I also want to know of students who might be a danger to you."

"I don't think he's a danger."

"Harry . . ." He knew saying the boy's name was enough of a surprise it often took him off guard -- and wondered briefly how often he had been called 'Harry' by his relatives; not often, he would wager -- and he was willing to use any weapon in his arsenal to get through to this boy. "Harry, would you let me be the judge of that?" He moved another step closer and sat on the corner of the desk, just in front of the boy. Folding his arms over his chest, he lifted an eyebrow. "I have had a bit more experience ascertaining levels of danger of teenage boys." Not to mention that of Death Eaters' sons.

"I guess. He just . . . Well, he only just said some stuff after the match yesterday. But Teddy, he and Millie said I should watch out for him 'cause his father was a supporter of . . . of him. And then last night, he . . . it was just weird." Severus nodded and gestured for Harry to continue. "I don't want any trouble. For me or him."

"I understand. Like your friends, I shall just keep an eye out."

"Okay, okay. It--" Harry broke off, slapping a hand to his forehead. His face crumpled with pain.

"Harry?" Severus leaned toward him, reaching for his arm. "What is it? Your scar?"

"Forest," he gasped. "Blood . . . He . . . he's thirsty." When Harry pulled his own hand off his forehead, it came away slick with blood. Then his eyes rolled back in his sockets, and Severus barely caught the boy before he hit the floor.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! We've hit three thousand reviews! And over one thousand people have this story listed as one of their favorites; how cool is that??? You guys are da bomb!

Alas, due to my new job, my rate of updating may be a bit slower than previously. I hope to update every week or two, but if I fall behind a bit, please bear with me. My thanks, and Harry hugs for all!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 35

By jharad17

Disclaimer: Waaaah! None of this is mine!

Warnings: language, allusion to mild, non-graphic sexual abuse

Previously:

"Okay, okay. It--" Harry broke off, slapping a hand to his forehead. His face crumpled with pain.

"Harry?" Severus leaned toward him, reaching for his arm. "What is it? Your scar?"

"Forest," he gasped. "Blood . . . He . . . he's thirsty." When Harry pulled his own hand off his forehead, it came away slick with blood. Then his eyes rolled back in his sockets, and Severus barely caught the boy before he hit the floor.

Harry woke in the Infirmary. He knew where he was before he even opened his eyes, because of the smell and the feel of crisp hospital-issue sheets. When he did open his eyes, he shut them again very quickly. The light in the room jabbed into his head like a spike to the brain, even though it was the middle of the night, as far as he could tell from that split second of seeing.

God, his head.

"Harry," said a low voice he recognized at once. Snape. Bloody hell, could this get any worse? "I know you're awake."

He nodded a tiny bit, but even that made his head go all woozy, and he pressed his hands to his temples, to hold his brains still.

The professor murmured something softly and Harry could hear the whisper of something moving through the air and then a sput of it hitting flesh. A second later, he heard a cork come out, and then, still

using a quiet voice, Snape said, "I have a potion for your pain. Let me help you sit up."

"K." Harry tried not to shy away when Snape slid an arm under his shoulders and drew him upwards, but it was too hard not to. He was already in pain, and he was always less able to hide his feelings when he was hurting. But Snape said nothing snarky about it, and when he had Harry sitting up far enough, he held a glass bottle to his lips.

"Drink," he said, and Harry could almost hear the smile that accompanied his next words, "and try not to dwell on the taste."

"Thanks," Harry said wryly, and was surprised by how rough his voice sounded. But he swallowed the potion as fast as he could, trying to let it touch his tongue as little as possible. Blech. There had to be a way to make potions taste better. In moments, however, he'd forgotten the taste as the stabbing pain faded from his head. He sighed in relief as Snape lowered him back to the pillows.

"Better?"

Harry opened his eyes to slits, experimentally, and was pleased to see that he could see, without agony. "Yeah. Er . . . yes. Thank you, sir."

"I am pleased to see your manners are as crisp as ever."

Harry wrinkled his nose, not sure if he was being mocked or not, but he was too tired to worry about it.

"I need you to tell me about your vision, Harry."

Giving the professor a quick look, Harry rubbed his hands over his face. "Couldn't you . . ." He coughed to clear his throat; it felt raw, as if from screaming, but he couldn't recall doing that. He couldn't remember much about his body, back in Snape's office, in fact, after the pain began. "Couldn't you have just gone in and looked while I was out?"

"I could have, if I never wanted you to wake up again." At Harry's dropped jaw, the professor gave him a mild -- for Snape -- sneer. "Legilimency is a very precise art, Mr. Potter, and the way you were thrashing around, with at least one other presence in your mind, if I had gone in as well . . . Let's just say the results could have been catastrophic."

"Oh."

"Indeed." The Professor leaned back a bit in his chair. "Tell me what you saw."

Harry nodded, and closed his eyes so he could picture it better. "There was a creature, not sure what it looked like, really, 'cause it was like I was seeing through its eyes or something. But I think we were, er, that it was in the Forest, here." He opened his eyes and looked at the window. "At Hogwarts, I mean. It was racing through the trees, and I could feel how hungry it was, how . . ." He swallowed. "How thirsty. It wanted blood, desperately." He glanced up at Snape. "Do you think it could be a vampire?"

Snape's eyes narrowed, but he shook his head. "I very much doubt it. Go on. What else did you see?"

"I was, I mean, it was chasing something, and I didn't know what, at first, and we . . . it was moving so fast, and then I could see what we, what it was chasing, and it smelled so good. Was a unicorn," he whispered, the feelings of the vision coming back to him and making him nauseous. He couldn't believe he had . . . No! That some creature had killed a unicorn. "It attacked the unicorn, and they fought, but then there was a blast of magic, a green light, I think, and seconds later, the creature sank his teeth in and . . . and drank." He licked his lips unconsciously, remembering.

"The creature drank the unicorn's blood?"

Staring at his hands in his lap, Harry nodded, feeling sick. "It was silvery and . . ." He stopped himself before he said how good it had tasted. How pure and delicious and . . . God, how disgusting was he?

"What do you think, Albus?" Snape asked, a little louder than he had been speaking to Harry.

As Harry brought his head up in surprise, the Headmaster moved from the shadows of the room into the circle of moonlight surrounding Harry's bed. Oh, no. Had he heard everything Harry had said? It seemed so, for he said, "It seems the report Hagrid received from the centaurs was quite correct."

"How many, then?"

"Firenze told him they had found four bodies thus far."

"Someone's killing all the unicorns?" Harry asked, ashamed to hear his voice rise an octave. The sheer glory of the animal as it galloped through the forest, its power and strength and ethereal beauty had affected Harry very strongly. That someone -- that the creature he had seen -- was killing such wondrous animals was horrifying.

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said. He held his hands folded together in front of his chest, just above the ends of his long, white beard, and Harry could see how tensely they were twisted together.

"But why?"

"Can you not discern the reason?" Snape asked. "After what you saw?"

Harry shook his head, but then said, "You said it's not a vampire."

"No."

"But it needs the blood to live."

"What makes you say that?" the Headmaster asked Harry.

"I just . . . I don't know. But somehow, that's the feeling I got." His heart had beat harder, stronger, after he had drunk the blood of the

unicorn. He had never felt more alive . . . Harry squeezed his eyes shut. No! That wasn't him.

There was a moment's pause before the Headmaster said, "I believe you are correct."

"It's Vol . . . I mean, it's You Know Who, isn't it? Who's killing them." Harry swallowed and looked at Snape. The professor's eyes held his, lending him the strength he desperately needed just now. He gestured to his scar. "'Cause I wouldn't have seen it otherwise. Right?"

"Yes." Snape made an abortive move with his right hand, as if he was going to put it on one of Harry's, as if he was going to try and comfort Harry. But he took his hand back quickly, with a glance at the Headmaster. "I am concerned, Harry, we are concerned you might have an unintentional connection to the Dark Lord and may have other visions like this."

Harry nodded, fiddling with the edge of the blanket covering his legs and wishing that he could be normal for just one minute. "Yeah, I figured."

"There are ways to counter such forays into your mind, Mr. Potter," the Headmaster said. "To stop the intrusion once it starts, or block the visions from getting in, in the first place."

"Really?" Harry felt the first tendrils of hope enter his heart. "How?"

Instead of answer, the Headmaster turned to Snape and gave him a long look.

Snape felt the weight of the older man's stare, but did not bend. He glared back. "Absolutely not. He is too young. His mind is not ready for that."

The Headmaster merely smiled. Even in the dimness of the Infirmary, Harry could have sworn he saw a sparkle in the old Wizard's eyes. "Did you not tell me previously that you believe he is a natural Occlumens? If so, I believe he just needs focus, and practice."

Snape's glare hardened into something more terrifying to behold, and Harry was very glad the look was not aimed at him. "Being able to cast me out of his mind is one thing. But to cast out the Dark Lord? It's too much. I will not jeopardize Harry's sanity like that."

"It's Harry now, is it?" the Headmaster asked, beaming at Snape. He waved one of his hands negligently. "He will need to know how to do it sooner or later, or I predict many more trips into Poppy's domain. And as much as I'm sure the boy enjoys her hospitality . . ."

Snape pressed his face into his hands and was silent for several long moments. Harry hated being talked about like he wasn't in the room, but his aunt and uncle had done so all the time, so he was well used to the feeling, and he didn't interrupt.

"Damn you, Albus," Snape muttered so softly that Harry was pretty sure no one was meant to hear. Then his head came up and he gave Harry a measuring look. Harry frowned back a little, confused, and not sure what Snape was trying to figure out. He just hoped whatever it was, he was doing it right. Then, to Harry's amazement, Snape mouthed the words, "I'm sorry," before he turned back to the Headmaster. Snape had apologized? To him? The last time, he had understood why, at least. This time . . . Harry's frown deepened as he gave his attention back to Professor Dumbledore, too.

"Very well, Headmaster," Snape said, more formally than he'd spoken before. His face was back in the blank mask that Harry knew so well, and for some reason, that alone was enough to make the hairs on the back of Harry's neck rise. "I will teach him. But I want a concession from you, as well."

The Headmaster's smile was absolutely radiant. "I will see what I can do, Severus. What is it you require?"

"If I am to teach the boy Occlumency, at his age, then I will need to have access to him year round. The Art is too delicate to leave to such an otherwise constrained schedule. That means we will work during holidays, too, both winter and summer, and I will not call upon him in that Muggle hovel. It is an inappropriate learning environment."

Harry held his breath. Not go to the Dursleys during the summer?? Was it possible for him to get that lucky?

The Headmaster was nodding before Snape even finished. "Winter holidays, of course you may work together. I imagine Harry, here," and Harry jumped, startled, at hearing his given name come from the Headmaster's mouth, "will be staying in Hogwarts then, regardless."

"Naturally," Snape said, in almost a snarl. Harry wondered why. Snape knew, at least somewhat, why Harry didn't want to go to the Dursleys. Did the Headmaster know, too?

"But the summer holidays . . . I'm afraid that is out of the question."

"Unacceptable."

"Severus, you know the Board of Governors does not allow any student to remain in Hogwarts over the summer holidays."

Snape swung around on his chair and pinned the Headmaster with the Look that made his students quail. The Headmaster did not seem ruffled. "Not even Harry Potter? Not even if you informed the Governors that his life will be in danger if he returns to their loving care?" The amount of sarcasm dripping from the Potion Master's mouth was nothing short of awe inspiring.

Harry watched the two of them battle it out -- over him! -- for another few minutes, hearing various things like 'blood wards' and 'statutes' and 'continuity of instruction' before the Headmaster sharply interrupted Snape mid-sentence, saying, "We will discuss this more at another time, Severus. I believe Mr. Potter needs his sleep more than he needs to hear our disagreements."

Snape drew himself up, obviously not used to people interrupting him -- recalling his one experience at doing so filled Harry with a fair amount of fear -- and nodded once, a mere jerk of the head. "As you say, sir." He rose from his chair and turned to Harry. "My apologies, Mr. Potter, for keeping you from your rest. Good night."

He turned in a swirl of robes and left the Infirmary in several long strides. The door swung shut behind him with a soft sound, leaving the room in silence. Harry stared after the professor, wondering if he had just been abandoned to the metaphorical wolves. No. Snape wouldn't do that to him. Probably.

The Headmaster caught his stare and smiled benevolently. "I'm sure we'll work it out, Mister Potter," he said, not unkindly. "Professor Snape will come around. We don't want you to have a vision while you're up on your broom, for instance, do we?"

Harry barely kept from rolling his eyes. He wasn't a baby, for pity's sake. "No, sir. Of course not."

"No, of course not," Dumbledore repeated and nodded, seemingly to himself. "I'll let you get your rest now, Mr. Potter. Sleep well."

Before the Headmaster could reach the doors, however, Harry called out to him, "What about the unicorns, sir?"

Dumbledore cocked his head a bit as he looked back at Harry. "What about them, child?"

"Who's going to protect them, you know, from You Know Who? What if he tries to kill another one?"

"Don't you worry about that," the Headmaster said, smiling his kindly smile. "Just get some rest. Everything will be just fine in the morning." With that, he was gone, and Harry was absolutely furious, at having been condescended to. Again.

The next day, after he was released from the Infirmary, he sought out Millie and Teddy as soon as he could. He told them about the weird vision he'd had, and about other unicorns being killed in the forest, which had been confirmed by Hagrid. And he told them how he was almost certain that the creature killing the unicorns was going to try to steal whatever it was that the cerberus was guarding. Not immediately, but soon. Though he didn't say so to his friends, he had gotten a strong sense about the creature's plan, while he had been watching through the creature's eyes.

"So . . ." Teddy gazed at him through narrowed eyes. "What do you want to do about it?"

"I think we have to find out what it's guarding and figure out why You Know Who wants it. I'll wager it has something to do with keeping him alive."

"I don't know, Harry," Millie said. "I don't really like dogs all that much."

Harry smiled grimly. "Hopefully it won't come to us having to go in that room. But I think, if we can figure out what he wants with it--"

"Harry," Teddy interrupted. "Why don't you just tell Professor Snape about this?"

Harry gaped at him. "Tell the professor?" he asked after a moment.

"Yeah. I mean, if he's helping to guard whatever-it-is, he'd want to know that creature's going to try and steal it, right?"

"I . . ." Harry frowned. Tell a teacher? Tell Snape? "I don't know, Teddy." What if they told him and Snape didn't care? What if he laughed at Harry's fears, or didn't listen, or worst of all, just blew off his concerns as those of a stupid, attention-seeking brat? What if he ignored Harry, like practically every other adult he had ever met had done? Hell, instead of ignoring him, he might even give Harry detention for knowing about the cerberus at all, since the third floor corridor was supposed to be forbidden.

"What don't you know, Harry?" Teddy asked softly. "I mean, this seems like the sort of thing we ought to warn him about. After all, we can't be expected to do anything about it; we're just first years." He paused, then, "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid!" Harry said. "I'm not. But . . . well, you can't trust them."

"Them?"

"You know, teachers. Professors. Upperclassmen." Harry shook his head. "Nobody."

Teddy held his gaze for a long time, then said, "Is that a Muggle thing?"

Harry frowned, not understanding, and Millie, who had been looking back and forth between the two of them, like at a tennis match, now she spoke up. "It isn't, is it, Harry? Not just Muggles. You really don't trust anyone."

He shrugged, still a bit confused. "I trust you guys. And Hermione."

Millie gave him a sly smile. "That's 'cause we're naturally trustworthy. Well, maybe not that Gryffindor, 'cause of how she cursed your Frogs--"

"She didn't!"

Millie laughed. "I was just kidding, Harry. But really, I wouldn't say we could go to any teacher, like not McGonagall or the Headmaster, obviously, but we can trust our Head of House . . . I mean, once he started treating you decent, he's been okay." Then suddenly, she frowned. "But what do you mean by 'upperclassmen'? Did that worm Gaius bother you again?"

Harry winced. He'd meant to tell them before, but hadn't gotten around to it . . . no, if he was honest with himself, he'd admit he hadn't wanted to tell them; he'd been embarrassed at getting himself cornered by the git so easily.

"He did!" Millie exclaimed. "Damnit, Harry, why didn't you say anything?"

Harry shrugged and looked away, but when Teddy said, "C'mon, you can tell us," he admitted, "'Cause I was stupid," he mumbled. "And I didn't want you to know."

"Well, that's the part that's stupid," Millie told him. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit."

"Millicent!"

"Oh, shut it, Nott. You know it's bullshit, too."

Teddy rolled his eyes. "Of course it is, but your vulgarity is uncalled for."

"Prude," Millie muttered. "So, spill, Harry. What did he do? Did he hurt you?"

Harry snorted. "That's what Snape asked."

"You told Snape!? How--"

Teddy interrupted Millie mid-rant. "Good for you, Harry. That must've been tough."

Harry shrugged one shoulder. "Yeah, but I had to. We made a deal."

"What kind of deal?" Millie asked, but Teddy gave her a pointed look.

"We're getting a bit off track, Bullstrode."

"Oh, yeah. Right. So when was this, with Gaius?"

"Saturday night." Harry looked down at his hands, unable to deal with his friends' expressions. He knew he'd been an idiot to let himself be trapped alone. "He followed me into the toilet."

"Was anyone else in there?" Millie asked.

Harry shook his head. "No . . . he just followed me in, and when I was washing up after, he came up behind me at the sinks." He swallowed,

feeling his hands shake and his face get hot. Stupid, he'd been so stupid.

"What did he do?" Teddy asked, real soft, like he thought Harry was going to cry or something. But he wasn't. He hadn't, in years.

"Just grabbed me," he said, real quick, to get it over with. "My arms. And he pressed up against me. I shoulda just shoved him or something, or told him to leave me alone. But then he just said some stuff and let me go." He shrugged again. "So, it wasn't any big deal anyway."

Millie and Teddy exchanged a look. Harry could see it out of the corner of his eye. "Look, you guys, he didn't do anything. It's not that big a deal."

"Okay, Harry," Teddy said, too quickly for Harry not to know he was just placating him. "But you told the professor all this?"

"Yeah. Well, most of it." Sort of. Except he'd not said who it was before the vision knocked him out. Stupid visions.

"Okay, that's good." Teddy glanced at Millie again. "So, will you tell Professor Snape about the whatever-it-is being in danger of larceny, or do you want me to?"

Harry stared at his friend. Teddy seemed perfectly serious. But if anyone was going to take the fall for this with the professor, Harry would not let it be one of his friends. He sighed. "I'll tell him."

Teddy smiled. "Excellent. Now, we still have an hour before lunch. I say we start our Transfiguration essay before it gets too noisy out here."

And so they did, with Harry trying to put all his various worries out of his mind. He hadn't told his friends about the training he might have with Snape, or the mess about his summer holidays, since none of that was definite anyway. But he was glad he'd told them about Gaius. That was one less secret he had to hold by himself.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! I know there's lots of readers, 'cause we've reached over half a million hits! Have I mentioned the "da bombness" of y'all lately? But, since I know you hate cliffies, I figured I'd get this new chapter out now, just to say thanks a million . . . or a half a million, in this case. Hehe (If you want, you can also thank MLK, Jr. for giving us Americans this fine holiday, so I had time to write . . .)

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 36

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine! Eh, I'll get over it.

Warnings: language, mild sexual abuse

UPDATE: To clarify my A/N at the end of the chapter, since there seems to be some confusion:

THIS STORY WILL NOT BE SLASH.

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

Snape drew himself up, obviously not used to people interrupting him -- recalling his one experience at doing so filled Harry with a fair amount of fear -- and nodded once, a mere jerk of the head. "As you say, sir." He rose from his chair and turned to Harry. "My apologies, Mr. Potter, for keeping you from your rest. Good night."

He turned in a swirl of robes and left the Infirmary in several long strides.

Severus did not meet personally with Harry again for several weeks. He wondered if the boy was avoiding him. It seemed very possible, after the mess he had made of things in the Infirmary. Arguing with the Headmaster, of all things. When he had become so frustrated he was on the verge of hexing the Old Coot, he had had to leave before doing anything of the sort. What must the boy think of him?

He had met with the Headmaster twice more since their argument in the Infirmary, and seemed no closer to an agreement than before. But he would not allow Albus to have his way this time! Not without him giving in with regard to Harry's summers. One way or the other, he would get the boy away from those horrid Muggles, especially if he was expected to put the added strain of Occlumens training on Harry's mind.

The week after his vision, Harry had completed his two hours of ingredient preparations as agreed, but did not ask to see any more pictures of his mother. And Severus had not even seen him since except for brief glimpses in the Great Hall at most meal times -- at least the boy was eating -- or in class. Yet, after each lesson, Harry packed his materials and fled, looking pale and stressed, and as if frightened he might be asked to stay behind. But since his work was up to standards, Severus had no reason to keep him. He did not think telling the boy he merely wanted to see how he doing would get the results he wanted.

He had assumed Harry would come to him, wanting to see more pictures of Lily, but perhaps he had been overwhelmed by the whole experience. After all, Severus had real memories of Lily, and Harry did not. The way he had called out to his mother, and tried to get her picture to acknowledge him, had nearly broken Severus heart. Maybe Harry did not want to put himself through that pain anymore, and Severus could hardly blame him.

But why should the boy avoid him? He had thought they were finally reaching a level of rapport where Harry would confide in him, and, if he could bear to admit, he found he missed the boy's quiet company as he worked on assignments or helped him with potion ingredients. What had changed?

Around the end of November, he finally decided to ask the Bloody Baron about it.

"Harry Potter has much on his mind, Severus Snape," the ghost intoned, once Severus explained his concerns. "You would do well to remember that."

Severus could not suppress a sneer, disliking being called out again by this ghost. "Like what? What has he told you?"

"He admits he still has his nightmares, of course, including a new one that seems to cause him great anguish. He spoke to me of the vision he had of happenings in the Forbidden Forest and the death of the unicorn. And, too, he said the Headmaster wishes him to learn

Occlumency. The prospect frightened him, naturally, especially as he has had to discover on his own what the term meant." The ghost paused, and his dark eyes almost glowed. "Is this true, Severus Snape?"

Severus nodded. "He wishes for me to teach the boy."

"Better you than he," the Baron said coldly. "He does not have as much care for Harry Potter as you, regardless of his motives to serve the greater good."

With a sigh, Severus said, "I know. He would tear the boy's mind apart to 'teach' him. At least . . . at least I have already had a glimpse of how Harry's mind works. I will do my best to spare him."

"I know you will." The ghost paused. "But you should explain the concept to him and not let him float adrift as he has been these last few weeks."

"I tried!" Severus exclaimed. "He has been avoiding me."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Perhaps he is afraid of Occlumency, like you said, and fears the power I will have over him."

"I very much doubt that is his reason," the Baron said sharply. "It's not you forcing him to learn that Art at his young age."

"Then I don't know. Perhaps he was very upset by what we discussed his last time in my office, the pictures, and his Muggle relatives, and then . . ." He trailed off, feeling as if a door had suddenly opened in his mind. For the first time since that Sunday evening weeks ago, he recalled what secrets he had been trying to pry from the boy, just before Harry had collapsed with the vision and begun writhing in pain on the floor of the dungeon. Despite the potions and spells he had tried, nothing had worked to stop the boy's convulsions or his vision, to sever the connection between Harry and the Dark Lord.

When he had told Harry, in the Infirmary, that he could not use Legilimency to see what had happened in his vision, he had been telling the truth. But he had tried to use a little known type of Legilimency, to loosen the Dark Lord's hold on the boy, and had found he could not penetrate the vision without causing Harry's mind irreparable harm. No, he had been unable to do anything to help the poor boy. He had never felt so helpless before, so completely powerless and lost, not even when, years ago, he had been held under the Cruciatus Curse by the Dark Lord, and was left drooling blood at his Master's feet.

I will protect him, Lily, he vowed once more.

His hands balled into fists. How could he have forgotten that conversation with the boy? The vision and the busy, argument-filled days with Dumbledore that followed were no excuse. What if something more had happened? He would never forgive himself. "Just before he had the vision, he told me another boy was making unwanted advances toward him," Severus said to the Baron through gritted teeth. "Has he mentioned anything of the kind to you?"

The Bloody Baron's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I have heard nothing, and I have seen nothing, as I only accompany him outside of Slytherin common rooms, which means . . ."

"It's one of my Snakes, I know."

"Which one?" the ghost demanded, hurtling his incorporeal body toward Severus so quickly he had to back up a pace, banging the backs of his legs on a low cabinet. The ghost's face was murderous, and Severus was, for perhaps the first time, truly afraid of him. At that moment, Severus knew that if he could, the ghost would kill for Harry Potter.

"I don't know; he didn't get a chance to say." Severus should have asked again, once Harry regained consciousness, but he had not. Why? It was very unlike him. He protected all his Snakes, even if from each other. Why had he not addressed the issue? And why did it feel as if he were only now remembering that it had been an issue to begin with?

"How dare you do noth--" the Baron started, but Severus held up a shaking hand.

Was it possible?

He did not need to draw his wand; it was already in his hand. The "threat" of the Bloody Baron charging at him had been enough for him to take it out without even thinking about it. Swishing the wand over his body -- especially his head -- several times, he cast a number of diagnostic spells. And then he cursed. Loudly.

Someone had Obliviated him.

Not very well, obviously, or he would not have retrieved the memories so easily . . . well, easily once he had had the proper trigger. Otherwise, he might never have recalled that portion of their conversation.

It had to have been Potter.

That stupid, unbelievably idiotic, snot-nosed little boy!

"What is wrong, Severus Snape? What have you discovered?" The Bloody Baron was still very close to him, still very angry looking, but his tone of voice was less threatening.

"That arrogant little shit Obliviated me!"

"Impossible. He does not have the capability, as yet."

"Spare me," Severus snarled as he headed for the door. He was going to tear that boy a new one. No one fiddled with his mind! "He did it; no one else knew about our conversation."

As he flung open the door to his office, the Bloody Baron zoomed in front of him, attempting to halt his progress in his march toward throttling the boy. "It must have been accidental magic. He cannot know what he has done. He would have--"

"He would have what?" Severus interrupted, even as he ignored the Baron and walked right through him. The cold went down to his bones, but he did not stop. His rage kept him warm. "He would have confided in you? Not if he wanted no one to know!"

"And why is that, Severus Snape?" The Baron flew in front of Severus again. "The boy is filled with shame about his family and the way they treated him, and he believes he is not worthy of anyone's care. He has learned, time and again, that those he confides in will turn their backs on him, that he is the one who suffers when anyone in his life attempts to 'help' him."

Severus walked through the ghost again, though his rage was not as hot as it had been, and he shivered upon resuming his march. "He stole my memories!"

"He protected himself!" the ghost snarled back at him. "Or, at least, I believe that is what he was trying to do."

"You know him so well, do you? Are you sure he has not tried the same with you?" Even as he said it, he knew it was stupid.

The Baron was floating backwards now, but still in front of Severus, so they could continually glare at each other. "Severus Snape, how could a boy, even with accidental magic, Obliviate a ghost?"

"If it could ever be done, Harry Bloody Potter is the one who would do it!"

"That is true," the Baron admitted. "I have seen him do things already I would have never imagined possible for a boy his age. But he did not do this intentionally, Severus Snape, I am sure of it. It will not go well for you if you condemn him without hearing his side."

Severus had reached the portrait to the Slytherins' common room, and he spat the password without replying.

Heads turned to see who stormed into the common room, and just as quickly turned away upon seeing his expression; none of his Snakes

was suicidal enough to stare at their Head of House when he was in a rage.

He took two strides toward a table of Firsties, all with their faces buried in books hastily lifted from the table. "Where is Potter?" he growled.

Though most of them kept their heads down, one or two even shaking in mere proximity to him, Zabini lowered his book far enough to eye him cautiously. "Boy's lav," he said clearly after a moment, and pointed.

Bulstrode's face reddened, but she did not call out the boy for giving Potter's location up. Instead, she dared to meet Severus' eyes. "Why do you want to know, sir? He hasn't done--"

Before she could even finish her sentence, Severus swirled away from her in a billow of robes. Potter had done something. Something unforgivable. And he would be punished. But when he slammed open the door of the boy's lavatory, all thoughts of that kind flew from his head at the sight that greeted him.

Gaius Avery, grandson of one of the Dark Lord's oldest supporters, had Harry Potter pushed up against the tile wall, his hands gripping Harry's hips hard enough to leave bruises, and was grinding against him, or had been until Severus made his entrance.

Harry had his trousers on, but no shirt, and the expression on his face had never been more blank as he stared at the doorway Snape had come through. His glasses were gone, and the boy's green eyes were unfocused and held no life in them at all. Severus spotted something long and thin under the nearby sinks and realized it was Harry's wand. He'd apparently tried to defend himself, but been disarmed.

Before Severus could get to the wretched filth, to tear him away from Harry, the Fifth Year had the audacity to smirk at him as he stepped back, shoving Harry into the wall.

Harry clung to the wall as if it were a lifeline and closed his eyes.

Hands in tight fists, and choking on his own horror at the situation, Severus forced himself not to go to Harry and check to make sure he was all right. For one thing, it was perfectly obvious that he was not . . . though he still had his trousers on, despite the compromising position, so there was that hope, at least. For another, with the Dark Lord very close nearby, he had to be careful not to give his true allegiances away, especially with this Avery boy, despicable as he was. But keeping his instincts to protect Harry in check, right now, very nearly broke him.

"What in the name of Salazar Slytherin is going on here?" Severus asked, his tone as cold and dangerous as it had ever been. He drew himself up to glare down at the damnable boy.

"Just a bit of fun, sir," Avery said with a cool smile. "Isn't that right, Harry."

Harry flinched at the way Avery slurred his name, and did not answer. He did not need to.

"You, Mr. Avery, are a Fifth Year, and have already reached your majority, have you not?"

"So?"

"So, Mr. Potter is very much still underage, and thus any fun of this kind is illegal for you to participate in, with him."

Avery's mouth grew pinched, and his carefully crafted smile vanished. "I only turned sixteen a couple weeks ago, sir. Besides, Harry's up for it, aren'tcha?" Again, Avery slurred his way across Harry's name, and again, the younger boy flinched from the sound.

"It doesn't matter if he is, Mr. Avery," Severus told him coldly, though his stomach churned nauseatingly. "Potter is underage and you are not. The Headmaster will need to hear of this, and you will be lucky if you are not expelled."

"Expelled?!" Rage turned Avery's face ugly in an instant. "You can't do that."

"I won't," Severus said, glowering back at the insolent boy as he lost any patience he had left, Dark Lord's supporters be damned. "It is the Headmaster's job to decide, as I said. Now get out! Go to your dormitory until you are sent for."

"Of course, sir," the older boy said facetiously. And then, as a parting shot, he traced his hand across Harry's back and murmured, "See you later, Harry."

Severus grabbed Avery by the arm and flung him across the room hard enough that he hit the wall beside the door with a meaty thud. "GET OUT!" he bellowed. "And never touch Potter again!"

Avery's eyes were wide for a moment, till they narrowed to slits, filled with cunning to match his smile. "As you say. Sir." He escaped the lavatory before Severus could get to him again. Damn!

Immediately, Severus turned back to Harry. As the door to the lavatory closed, the boy had crumpled to the floor, where he was hugging himself, knees to his chest, in the smallest ball he could make. Severus was at his side an instant later, crouched down at his level, yet he dared not touch him, not wanting the boy to panic.

"Harry?" he said instead.

"Go'way," Harry said in a voice nearly at the breaking point. He did not look up. "Leave me alone."

"I can't do that," Severus told him. "I told you before. When I am in a position to aid you, I cannot leave you alone."

"Don't need your help."

"I beg to differ." Severus wordlessly summoned the holly wand under the sinks to himself, then held it out to the boy. "Your wand," he said softly.

One of Harry's hands lashed out to grasp his wand, then jerked back into the protective cradling that his arms were giving the rest of his body.

"Tell me what happened."

"You saw," Harry mumbled into his arms.

"Mm. Was this the same boy you said was making you uncomfortable a couple weeks ago?" His earlier rage on this topic was gone, and the only emotion he could drum up over the Obliviation was a vague sense of curiosity, about why Harry had done it. Harry had not wanted the advances, and yet, he had forced the person he had confided in to forget what he'd said about it.

After a slight pause, Harry nodded.

Severus steeled himself and asked, "Was this the first time he's attacked you since then?"

Another pause, then a head shake for "no."

A sound of abject disgruntlement came from behind him, and he turned, wand at the ready, to see the Bloody Baron hovering near the door. "Why did you not tell me, Harry Potter?" the ghost asked. "I thought you were safe within the walls of Slytherin, or I would have kept to your side even here."

Harry's head came up at last, and Severus saw no traces of tears on his face, despite expectations, just a heavy weariness in the boy's mien. "It's nothing. He didn't hurt me. I'm fine."

Severus shook his head, even as the Baron said, "You are not. I thought the troubles you were having these last weeks, with not eating or sleeping, were because of the nightmares you were suffering over the unicorn. But I see now that it was something far more insidious. Why did you tell no one? Why did you not tell me?"

"I couldn't!" Harry yelled, and Severus was glad he had shown emotion at last.

"Surely you could have--"

"No! You don't get it," Harry interrupted the Baron, a bright spark of anger lighting his eyes. "If I told, he said he'd . . ."

"Said what, Harry?" Severus prompted when the boy trailed off. "What did he threaten you with?"

"Can't say, he'll . . ." Harry shook his head and held it in his hands. He pulled at his hair like he would yank it all out if he could, and his eyes were squeezed shut. "Can't tell."

Severus wondered if he could be under a compulsion of some kind, but discarded the idea quickly. Those under a compulsion usually could not even say that they could not say. Harry was just frightened. Probably with good reason. "Tell me, Harry, and I will make sure he is thrown so far out of Hogwarts he'll need a time turner to find his way to Hogsmeade."

The boy turned his face to Severus'. "But you said--"

"I said what I had to, to the son of one of the Dark Lord's favored supporters, Harry. If he threatened you, too, he will be gone before the end of the day."

Harry swallowed and managed a small nod. "He said if I didn't play along, he'd do it to my 'Mudblood friend' next." He closed his eyes as a shiver went through his body. "Hermione. He meant Hermione."

Severus nodded, though he felt sick. He knew now why Harry had Obliviated him, whether consciously or not. How little faith this poor boy had in him, in any of the adults in his life, that he would rather give in to a sadist like Avery than trust any of them to keep him -- or his friend -- safe. But then, what had the Baron said, while Severus was stalking his way down here? That any time the boy had been told he was going to receive help, he had suffered instead. He had heard the truth of that, in the conversation Harry had with his owl, when, rather than being rescued from his neglectful relatives, he had been

locked up and starved when the nurse from his school investigated his home life.

That would not happen here. Not if Severus had anything to say about it.

"Harry, I want you to come with me to see Madam Pomfrey," he said quietly.

"No!" Harry actually shrank back against the wall. "No, I'm fine!"

"You aren't," Severus insisted. "You may have internal--"

"No! He never did anything, not anything more than like this." The boy swallowed, like he was about to throw up, but to his credit, continued. "Said I was too scrawny, too little for him, but when I got bigger, he'd . . ."

And then Severus understood. He would murder Avery, strangle him with his own two hands. "You don't want her -- or me -- to know you haven't been eating. You did not want to get big enough for him to do any more to you."

Harry nodded jerkily. His thin shoulders were quivering. "Sorry, I'm sorry, sir. I know I said I'd take the potions and eat right and all, I know I promised, but I couldn't! I didn't want, I mean, I didn't . . . I couldn't. . . . I'm so sorry." And here were the tears Severus had expected before: big, fat tears, rolling down his pale, pinched cheeks as his starved body trembled.

"Oh, Harry," he murmured, and reached out with one hand to wipe a tear away, or to cup this child's head and tell him it would be all right, that he didn't blame the boy for protecting himself, not at all, when he suddenly found himself with an armful of sobbing eleven-year-old, skinny limbs and all.

If anyone had told him, three months ago, that he would one day hold James Potter's son in his arms and offer him comfort during a good cry, he would have laughed them all the way to St. Mungo's. And yet, here he was, murmuring soft nonsense words to the boy, patting his

back and smoothing his other hand over his black, perpetually messy hair.

As the boy cried himself out, clutching at his shoulders and pressing his tear-damp face into his robes, a dam of emotions broke inside Severus, washing over him like nothing he had ever felt before. He had promised to protect this boy; he had sworn an oath. He had felt protective of him, and angry for him when he had faced those Muggles, and he had shared the pain of loss with the boy in his parents' graveyard and looking over the photographed memories of the woman who meant so much to both of them.

But he had never felt this before, whatever this was . . . just that his heart felt both loosened and constricted at the same time, and he knew he would protect Harry with his own teeth and nails if he had to, and he knew he would never, could never, send him back to those Muggles. He wanted the boy to trust him, and to come to him when he had troubles, and he would hold the boy, just like this . . . like a father should. Like his own father should have, if he had not been such a bastard. Like James should have done, for Harry, if he had not died facing the Dark Lord.

It was time Harry had someone he could count on for good. Like a father, who he could lean on and believe in, and trust. Severus would make it happen. He owed it to Lily. He wanted it for Harry, and for himself.

"It's all right. I'm here," he whispered into the boy's hair as the sobs slowly abated and turned to occasional sniffs and hitched breaths. "I'm here for you. I'll always be here for you."

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! Since a number of people have asked (in reviews and PMs) I figured I would address the question of pairings briefly. At this point (when Harry is only 11 yrs. old) I have no idea what pairings will be like in later books in this series. There will be later books in the series, though, as I plan to write one for each of his 7 years at Hogwarts. So, yay, right?

On a completely separate topic, I've been reading a lot of time-travel fic lately (usually Slash, in the Marauders Era, and usually either HPLM or HPSS), and I've been bitten by a plot bunny -- hope it didn't have rabies. I was wondering if anyone would be interested in me writing such a thing, that is, a time-travel story with slashy goodness, though not necessarily one of those listed above. There'd be a fair amount of angst ('cause that's my first love, naturlich) but it would be primarily a romance. Let me know, in PM or reviews, if you would like to see one from me, 'cause it'd be way different from the Sevitus stuff I usually do. It would, obviously, not supercede any story I am currently working on, and all of my stories will be completed, no matter what. Pinky swear!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 37

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine! Eh, I'll get over it.

Warnings: language, references to mild sexual abuse

Note to viewers: This story (of Harry's first year in Hogwarts) will not be slash.

A/N: Looks like, from the informal poll I took last chapter, that about 90 percent of you are firmly pro-TimeTravel fic, either slashy or non-slashy, with about 10 percent giving the idea a thumbs down for various reasons. So, um, yeah, since my country of origin is democratic and all (at least for the time being; by next year, who knows) I shall bow to the majority opinion. Besides, I think my bunny is a decent one. It will be a week or two before I get the first chapter written, though. In the meantime, enjoy this little number. Onwards!

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

It was time Harry had someone he could count on for good. Like a father, who he could lean on and believe in, and trust. Severus would make it happen. He owed it to Lily. He wanted it for Harry, and for himself.

"It's all right. I'm here," he whispered into the boy's hair as the sobs slowly abated and turned to occasional sniffs and hitched breaths. "I'm here for you. I'll always be here for you."

Harry heard the words that Snape said, but like the words that had been whispered to him over the last few minutes, or hours, or years, since he started bawling like a baby, they didn't make any sense. He finally seemed to be getting control back, though, and that's what mattered.

Once he'd gotten his breathing firmly back to near-normal, he dared to lift his head and face the music. What had he been thinking, to throw himself at the professor like that? Snape must think him a complete idiot, an utter prat, and a unbelievable . . .

Wait. What was he saying?

". . . s'all right, Harry. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you."

What was that supposed to mean? No one had ever said such things to him. He cleared his throat. "Professor?"

The hand smoothing over his head stilled -- and he had never felt such a thing in his entire life, but God, did it feel nice, and soothing. Gentle, like someone actually wanted to feel better, like they cared about him, which he knew was a lie, of course. It was all so surreal.

Fingers then, under his chin, lifted his face to meet the professor's. Harry stared into dark, fathomless eyes, then looked quickly away. "Sorry," he said, his throat still clogged with tears and mucus from his running nose. He tried not to look at the professor's snot and tear dampened shoulder. He was in enough trouble already. "Sorry, sir."

"There is no need to apologize," Snape said in the same gentle tone he'd been using, and did not let go of Harry's chin.

"But I . . . I mean, you're . . ." He gestured helplessly at the mess on Snape's robe, but he would not meet the professor's eyes no matter what. He brought a hand up, cautiously, to wipe his nose. "I shouldn't've cried. Sorry."

"Harry . . ."

The tone Snape continued using was so unfamiliar to him that he had absolutely no idea how to respond to it. Instead, he stood up suddenly, pushing himself awkwardly away from the professor and to his feet. The feel of his wand in his hand gave him some semblance of calm. When Gaius had called, "Expelliarmus," in his face, seconds

after he'd drawn the length of holly, he'd known he was in serious trouble.

But he could not, would not think about that now.

"Sorry, sir," he said again, because that's what was done, when he had been bad or wrong or insolent or whatever. Apologize, again and again, and maybe he would escape the cupboard. Feeling suddenly cold, and horribly exposed, he cast about for his tee-shirt and spied it where Gaius had dropped it, after so casually taking it from him, despite Harry's attempt to make him stop. Harry shivered again, remembering, and then pushed those memories away. Hard.

Just as Harry started for the shirt, Snape stood, and it looked like he was reaching to touch Harry's shoulder when the door to the lavatory banged open. Harry jumped, and, not even thinking, hid himself behind the professor.

Millicent stood in the doorway, looking furious, though Harry could only barely see her from his hiding place behind Snape. "Harry!" she yelled. "Do you want to tell me why that bastard Gaius just came out of here? I thought I told you--" She seemed to realize, all at once, that Professor Snape was also in the lavatory and stopped short. "Oh," she said, much more calmly, though her face was flushed, or perhaps it had already been. "Hello, Professor."

Snape inclined his head. "Miss Bulstrode."

"Is . . ." She scanned the room, and stared at where Harry was, though fortunately, she could not meet his eyes. Harry wasn't sure he could ever look her -- or anyone -- in the eye again. "Is Harry okay?"

Instead of answer, or scream at her for yelling and cursing in front of him, Snape turned slightly, so he could gaze down at Harry, who turned his face up like he knew he should, but, again, kept his gaze cast down. Then, softly, Snape said, "He is not . . . injured, at this time. Please return to your common room."

Goosebumps had broken out all over Harry's chest and arms, and he hugged himself tightly, shoulders hunching up for better protection.

"But sir, I--"

"Now, Miss Bulstrode," the professor said, in a tone that brooked no insolence.

But Millie opened her mouth to protest again, and so Harry leapt in to save her. "I - I'm okay, Millie. Please, j-just go."

He could feel her study him, even if he was mostly hidden, and he tried to project a sense of confidence, to let her know he was fine, but he had no idea how to do that anymore.

Slowly, she said, "All right. But Harry, please, please come talk to me."

He gave a short, jerky nod that he wasn't even sure she saw, and then she was gone, and he was alone with the professor again. Immediately, he darted for his tee-shirt and yanked it on in harsh, uncoordinated movements. His fingers fumbled, tucking it into his trousers, and he dared not look up even once, even though he knew the professor had turned his back, to give him some little privacy. He was extremely grateful.

"Thank you, sir," he said, when he was back to rights. He sidled toward the door to the lav. "I have . . . I've got an essay to finish. For Herbology."

"Harry . . ." the man said again, and Harry was sure he had never heard his given name from an adult so many times in a week, never mind just in this past hour. "You need to come with me to see the Headmaster."

Harry shook his head. No. No way. He was not about to tell what happened, not now, not ever. He didn't even want to think about it. Besides, all that would come of it would be more hurt, for him. And for Hermione. He kept moving toward the door, slowly, knowing if he went too fast, Snape would catch him out.

"I'm sorry," the professor said, and the words were too weird, on top of everything, that Harry stopped and glanced at him. That was a mistake, he realized, as he was caught by the man's expression . . . which really did look apologetic. But why??

"I'm sorry. You have no choice. This incident must be reported."

"No. No, I can't!" He stumbled back a step or two, to get away.

"It's the only way he will be punished," the professor said firmly, and Harry knew he meant Gaius, but at least, he was spared hearing the boy's name.

"Y-you can tell him. You saw!" He hated sounding accusing, since the professor was his rescuer, really, but he couldn't help the way the words sounded coming out of his mouth. He couldn't seem to control anything, right now.

"That would be sufficient to take points or give detention," Snape admitted. He stepped closer, slowly and carefully, as if Harry wouldn't notice. "But not to expel him. Not to file formal charges. For that, I need your corroboration."

"I don't care!" Harry yelled. "I'm not . . . I don't . . . No!"

For a long moment, Snape was quiet, and Harry almost thought he was going to give up and let Harry leave, let him go back to his dorm, back to the common room and back to the questioning looks from Millie -- and probably Teddy, too -- which he would gratefully ignore. But he did not. No, he kept on with that calm voice, and that calm, sorrowful expression, and he said, "How do you expect to protect your Miss Granger from him now?"

The question hit Harry in the gut, so hard he lost his breath. Oh, God. He'd told on Gaius. He'd told the professor about the threat, about the blackmail, and now Gaius would hurt Hermione! Harry couldn't be around her all the time, even if they studied together and spent all their free time together. He couldn't protect her when they were in different classes, or at night after curfew, when he knew Gaius and

some of his friends were often out and about. It was why he had given in to Gaius in the first place!

Harry shook his head. What had he been thinking? Oh, God, Hermione!

"Harry," Snape said, and he was so close now; he'd sneaked up on him! Harry was shaking so hard that he felt like he might fall down, and so he was almost grateful when the professor's hand landed on his shoulder, to give him a little bit of stability. He almost leant into the professor's side, but he knew better than that, and held his ground. He could stand all on his own; he could! He didn't need anyone else.

"Harry, you see why you must inform the Headmaster. He will get rid of that little pederast, I swear to you."

Snape's words were so soft, and so . . . forgiving, despite the fact that Harry had put Hermione in danger, and had probably broken other rules, too, that Harry's eyes unaccountably filled with tears. Blinking them away, he jerked a nod. He had to tell, now, or Hermione would be hurt. He only hoped Snape was right, and that Dumbledore would get rid of Gaius.

If he didn't, Harry wasn't sure what he would do.

Harry sat in the Headmaster's office, staring at his hands, neatly folded in his lap, with his wand tucked between them. His feet dangled a good foot or more off above the floor, but for once, he didn't really worry about the fact that he was short. He had never been in this room before, beyond the gargoyle and up the set of winding stairs, and he knew there were loads of interesting things within it, but he just could not bring himself to care. There was something ticking nearby, but not steadily, more a tick pause tick tick pause tick tick pause tick pause that he listened to, trying to hear a pattern, though there was not any he could figure out.

Snape and Dumbledore had been speaking together for a few minutes, and Harry couldn't really hear them either. He wasn't sure if they'd put up some kind of anti-eavesdropping charm, or if his ears were just feeling fuzzy. He knew he was tired, and all he wanted to do

was go hide in his bed, and maybe never come out. After taking a long, scalding shower, of course.

". . . Harry," Snape said, with the air of one who has said the same thing more than once, and Harry looked up, staring at the man's shoulder. The professor had not changed his robe, but he had whispered a cleaning charm at the spot where Harry had cried on him, so it was clear of all that gunky stuff. The professor was sitting next to him, in what looked like a comfortable chair, and had now turned so he was almost facing Harry.

"Yes, sir?"

"Please tell Professor Dumbledore what happened today."

He'd been thinking what to say, how he could possibly say it, for the last however-long it had taken for them to get here, and while he sat waiting. So now, he just blurted, "Gaius Avery threatened me." It seemed the best way to describe everything.

Dumbledore peered over his half-moon glasses at him; he noticed that the old man had no twinkle in sight. "How did he threaten you?" he asked, in a much kinder tone than even when he'd told him about the unicorns.

Harry swallowed, but made himself tell. It was the only way Hermione would be safe. It didn't matter about him, or whether he wanted to tell anyone or not. He didn't count. "Told me he'd hurt Hermione. Hermione Granger, I mean, if . . . if I didn't do what he wanted."

"And what did he want to do, child?"

Harry looked to Professor Snape, pleading with him silently to say the words for him, but the professor only shook his head. "I wish I could do this for you, but you have to say it, Harry."

For the first time today, Harry peered into the professor's eyes, to gauge his sincerity. Snape did not blink, or shy away, even though Harry was obviously a horrible freak and no one should ever look at him like he wasn't. Instead, his eyes held . . . not pity, but . . .

something he could not put a name to, but which made him feel -- briefly -- a bit safe, and kind of warm.

"He . . ." Harry swallowed again, and sat straighter in the chair, all the while, holding the professor's gaze. When Snape nodded, this time with the tiniest of crinkles around his eyes, like some kind of encouragement, Harry latched onto the rest of his courage and said, "He wanted to have sex. He wanted to make me do that."

Snape nodded slightly again, and it made it so much easier to answer when Dumbledore said, "He threatened to rape you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And did he?"

"No, sir!" Harry's hands were in fists now, and he started trembling again, unable to keep the awful feelings, the awful memories at bay much longer. "But he . . ."

"Go on, Harry," Snape said quietly. He reached out and put his hand on Harry's shoulder, and though he shouldn't have let him -- no one should touch a freak, after all -- he did anyway, because then he could answer the question.

"He was going to, he said," Harry whispered, still staring at Snape. "And he did other stuff. In the lav. He followed me in there, and took off my shirt, and took my wand, and pushed me into the wall and was rubbing against me, and . . ." He felt suddenly nauseous, like he might puke up his whole insides and never ever stop. Only the hand on his shoulder, squeezing ever so slightly, kept him in his seat.

"That's fine, dear boy. That's enough. Thank you."

There was a pause, while Harry got his roiling stomach under control, before he could say to the Headmaster, "Yes, sir."

"Well, Severus," Dumbledore said after another few minutes, "This certainly sounds like grounds for expulsion."

"Indeed," said Snape. He did not let go of Harry's shoulder, even though he glanced at the Headmaster, now.

"Please send Mr. Avery to me as soon as possible. I will notify his parents."

"What about the Aurors, Albus?" Snape asked. "When will you call them in?"

"I do not think that's necessary," the old man responded, and Snape squeezed Harry's shoulder a little tighter. Harry knew, suddenly, that he had lost something, something important, but he was not sure yet what it was. "I would hate to ruin the boy's prospects for the future, after all."

"He committed a crime!" Snape growled.

"And he will be expelled for it."

"I hardly think--"

"I hardly think now is the time to discuss this, Severus," Dumbledore said, his voice harder than before, and colder.

Harry was still staring at Snape, so when the professor turned back to him and caught his eye, Harry was almost ready. He did flinch, though, much to his chagrin. Snape pursed his lips, like he did when he was thinking hard, or when he wanted to say something scathing and had not yet found the words. Harry bit his lip and waited.

"Very well," Snape said at last. "But you owe this boy something as well." Turning back to the Headmaster, Snape gave him a long, hard glare. "And I plan for him to collect."

"I very much hope you are not asking about the summer again, Severus. We have spoken--"

"You have spoken, and you have not listened. Harry Potter has already done his fair share by this world. The least you can do is let him have a proper home. Especially now, he will need far more

support than those Muggles can ever give him. They treat him with disdain and worse, as it is! And if you still want him to learn Occlumency, which I still do not believe he is ready for . . ."

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw a gnarled hand sweep to the side, as if brushing away a rather large fly. "All right, all right! You have proved your point, Severus. I will see what I can do. But if we cannot find a suitable alternative for the Blood Wards, then he will have to return."

There was a glint in Snape's eyes that had not been there a moment before, though not many would be able to detect its presence. "Thank you, Headmaster. That is all I ask."

"Yes, yes, of course. If there is nothing else . . ."

Snape rose from his seat, and because Harry was still attached to him, hand to shoulder, Harry got up, too. "Good evening. I shall send Mr. Avery to you presently."

With one hand steering Harry out the door, Snape closed it behind them with his other. He led Harry all the way downstairs to the dungeon, and then to his office, where he sat Harry down in a chair and gave him a thick blanket to hide under, and even ordered Harry some hot cocoa from the House Elves, before he left, saying not to worry, that he was locking the door to his office, and no one could get in to trouble him. Harry murmured a thank you as the professor left, but he wasn't sure Snape had heard him.

Waiting for him to return, Harry curled up in the chair and sipped his cocoa, which was really quite good, and chocolatey, and made his hands warm, when they had been so utterly cold. He was still holding his wand in one hand, though not as tightly as before, but he could not quite manage to put it away yet. His mind was much calmer now than it had been, now that he was completely and totally ignoring the fact that he had been in the lavatory at all, earlier in the evening. Yes, better for all concerned if he just didn't think about that anymore. Else, how could he ever face going back in there again? And he had to wash, didn't he? He had to shower, tonight, soon, if possible . . .

Mostly, though, he looked into the depths of his mug of cocoa, as if therein lay the truths of the universe. Or of proper cocoa making at least. He almost smiled, inwardly, as he took the last sip, and just in time, too, as the professor returned just then, and Harry jumped, but didn't spill anything from his now empty cup.

Snape closed the door again. "He's gone," he said once Harry had settled himself back in the chair. "His parents have already come to collect him. He won't trouble you -- or Miss Granger -- again."

Something loosened from the tight, aching place in Harry's chest, and his breath caught. He clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes closed, as otherwise, he was afraid he might start bawling again, and he could not afford that, not in front of Snape of all people.

And then another voice -- the Baron! -- said, "I . . . requested Peeves pay him special attention on his way up to the Headmaster's office. I do believe there was phlegm involved."

Harry was so surprised he coughed out a laugh, then turned to look at the ghost, now hovering next to him, and nodded with a wan smile. "Thanks."

"You are very welcome, Harry Potter. I only regret I was unable to protect you when you truly needed it."

"S'okay," Harry said.

"It is not," the ghost said in the same tone he used all the time -- at least he had not changed, unlike Snape -- "but we shall not argue my failings at this time, if that is your wish."

"Um . . ." Harry sighed, feeling more tired than anything; just trying to parse out what the Baron was saying was exhausting. He pressed his not-wand-holding hand to his eyes. "Okay."

Snape saved him. Again. "I believe it is well past curfew, and thus time for you to go to bed, Harry. We will speak more of this tomorrow." He paused, then, "Unless you want to stay--"

Harry quickly shook his head. "No, sir. No, thanks." He shuffled out from under the blanket and shivered, struck by the sudden cold on his bare arms. He had not expected to leave the common room -- except to go to the loo -- again this evening, or he would have worn one of Dudders' old jumpers. The arms were too long, and they were too wide by a mile, but they didn't have any great gaping holes, just one or two here and there. He shook his head, still feeling like he wasn't thinking right, and started for the door.

Realizing he still had the cocoa mug in hand, he stumbled back to Snape's desk to place it carefully on the edge. "Thank you, sir."

"Harry." Snape stopped him, doing that putting-a-hand-on-his-shoulder thing again, and making Harry want to look up at him. Then Snape, for a wonder, moved his hand slowly, cautiously -- as if he didn't want to frighten Harry, but Harry was not frightened by Snape, not anymore -- and then his hand cupped Harry's cheek . . . like Harry was . . . not a freak.

"Yes, sir?" he whispered.

One thumb traced back and forth, softly across his cheek, and it was all Harry could do not to draw away, just because the sensation was so unusual. No one had ever been so kind to him. So gentle, so . . . caring. He had never once thought he deserved to be treated like this. He still didn't, Gaius had proved as much. But Snape . . . he didn't know what to think anymore.

"Promise me, Harry," Snape said, once Harry focused on the man's eyes again. "Promise, that if you have any trouble tonight, that you let me know."

"I . . . um, but what about . . ." Harry didn't want to go wandering through the corridors after curfew, in case Quirrell was around.

Snape's gaze flicked to the Bloody Baron for an instant, then back to Harry. "The Baron will be with you in your dorm tonight. If you have any trouble at all: nightmares or insomnia, or you want to talk, or you just want someone near you who can hear you breathe while you

don't talk, I want you to promise me you'll tell the Baron, and he will come get me, immediately."

Harry frowned a little, confused. Why would Snape want him to do that?

"Will you promise me, Harry?"

His hand was still on Harry's cheek, and Harry closed his eyes, just for an instant, and leaned, just a little, into a touch that for once, did not cause him pain or guilt or shame. Just for a moment he let himself dream that he could always have someone who would protect him, who would always care for him. He sighed, nodded, and opened his eyes. "I . . . I will. Yes, sir."

And then, an incredible thing happened. He saw Professor Snape smile.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! Hugs for Harry and Snape to all!

Alas, if you're one of the . . . 45 people who reviewed the previous ch. 37, which was an A/N, you won't be able to review this one. My apologies. But, you could always send me a PM instead! I'd love hearing from you; hugs!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 38

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine! Eh, I'll get over it.

A/N: By popular demand, I started the Time-Travel slashy fic and now have the first two chapters posted -- see my profile page for the link. It's called "Getting Back" and is told with multiple viewpoints (even Kreacher!). The first pairing is HP/RB, but will eventually become HP/SS. Other pairings to be named later.

A hearty thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! You make this all worthwhile. . . . The other night, though, I got a weird review on this story, (from an anonymous reviewer, natch) who said they liked the story, but not my "updating habits," so they weren't going to read Better Be Slytherin anymore . . . and here I thought I was doing well, updating as frequently as I do. shrug There's no pleasing some people, I guess. To that end, however, I also have a poll up on my profile page, asking if my faithful readers would rather I concentrated on one story to its completion, or do as I have been and keep posting to all my stories at once, as I get to them. Right now, the count is about tied.

I'll have another poll up next week, if more people want me to post to just one story, asking which story they want me to finish first. Stay tuned!

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

His hand was still on Harry's cheek, and Harry closed his eyes, just for an instant, and leaned, just a little, into a touch that for once, did not cause him pain or guilt or shame. Just for a moment he let himself dream that he could always have someone who would protect him, who would always care for him. He sighed, nodded, and opened his eyes. "I . . . I will. Yes, sir."

And then, an incredible thing happened. He saw Professor Snape smile.

Severus was in his chair by the fireplace, not wanting to fall asleep in case the Potter boy needed him during the night. He knew the Baron would wake him, if the boy did need him, but he did not want to waste those precious minutes it would take for him to become coherent again, never mind get dressed. So he stayed awake, reading -- or pretending to read, for his own peace of mind -- with a cuppa at his elbow on the small table beside his favorite chair, and he thought.

He wasn't sure anymore, what his intentions were with regard to the boy. To Harry. Surely he could no longer hold himself apart, as if he didn't care. Or worse, that he only cared (or didn't) because of Lily, (or James.) Ah, Lily. If things had been different the last few years of school, if he had never said those hurtful things to her, nor been involved with Lestrage, Rosier, and those other animals. . . .

No. He would not maunder in "might have beens." Doing so was extraordinarily unfair to Harry, as well as to himself. Things were how they were. He could not change the past, only the future. And the future must be changed. If it were not, if Harry's life were to continue in the direction it had been going up till now, if he were forced to return to the family that hated him and were given no support over what that bastard Avery had done to him . . . if Harry were to defeat Voldemort, a monster already in the process of returning, given the vision Harry'd had about the unicorns . . . if he were expected to destroy the Dark Lord without mental, physical and magical support and preparation, then not only was Harry doomed -- to a life of sadness and misery and violence -- but so, too, was the Wizarding World in its entirety.

Neither of these outcomes were ones Severus could live with.

And, he knew, neither could Harry.

Thus, Severus had to do something to shake up the status quo. If that meant putting his life and his job on the line, so be it. Severus already had one unbreakable vow in place concerning Harry Potter. To himself, in this moment, he made another: He would do anything in

his power to not only protect Harry, as his current vow held him, but to make sure he was prepared, as well as was possible, to meet his destiny.

As the second vow took effect on his magic, Severus felt a moment's peace. This was right. It was good. He had, in the last few years, nearly forgotten what such selflessness meant, what it felt like.

Less than a quarter hour later, a shimmer of silver appeared near the door of his quarters. Severus was on his feet before the Baron was completely finished sliding through the wall.

"It has begun," the ghost intoned.

Severus practically ran to the Slytherin dorms.

Thus was the pattern set for the next fortnight, at least: Severus would be woken -- or, more often, notified -- by the Baron, at some point near midnight, that Harry was having nightmares or could not sleep; more often the former than the latter. Severus would go to the boy, making sure as he entered the dorm to set Silencing charms, as well as a net of Stay-Sleeping charms over the rest of the boys, so none of them would wake and be curious about Harry's difficulty at night. Once in the dorms, he would sit with Harry for as long as it took for the boy to go back to sleep, or, if that was going to be impossible for him to do on his own, he would give the boy a Sleeping potion. Rarely, he gave him one for Dreamless Sleep.

Yes, despite the frequency of his nightmares, rarely. Aside from the regular side effects of that potion -- including the possibility of addiction -- it was not made for children, so Severus was hesitant about giving it to him at all. Sometimes, however, he knew the boy would get no rest otherwise, and Harry needed that more than anything else, except, possibly, proper nutrition.

During these nighttime visits, Harry rarely shared anything with Severus about his nightmares, but with some prompting he usually admitted to having them, at least. Severus did not chastise him for his silence. He recognized Harry's need to not appear weak, especially in front of him, an adult; after all, Harry's experience had taught him,

over and over, that adults were not to be trusted. But Severus meant to prove himself trustworthy, if it took all of Harry's seven years at Hogwarts to accomplish.

In order to make sure that were even possible, Severus had to stay at Hogwarts, and not fear for his own life at the same time. Which meant that, for one thing, before he had dropped Gaius Avery off at the Headmaster's office the evening he was expelled, he had Obliviated the hateful child of the memory of Severus' protectiveness of Harry. He could not have Avery running tales to his father, one of the Dark Lord's inner circle, of how Severus had saved the Boy Who Lived from some abuse, or else the Dark Lord would find out when he returned, and Severus would not be able to protect Harry in the future.

Even now, he was finding protecting Harry harder to do. Harry seemed to attract trouble like flames did moths. For instance, almost two weeks after Avery was expelled, the Brat Who Got into More Trouble than Any Nine Kneazles Put Together admitted to him that he knew what the three-headed hellhound was protecting.

Or rather, the boy copped to knowing that whatever-it-was, was something the Dark Lord wanted, even if Harry did not know what it was specifically called.

Trying to deny this year's secret in Hogwarts, Severus sat back in his chair and showed a blank face, but his mind was racing. "What in the world are you talking about, Potter?"

The boy's face became shuttered as he adopted the same blank stare, and Severus winced internally. This was no way to get Harry to open up to him. Besides, he had promised to call the boy "Harry" when they were not in classes, figuring it was one step along the long road to proving to the boy that not all adults were harsh and abusive. That some could treat him with a modicum of respect and caring.

Severus drew a deep breath and pressed fingers to his temple, trying to think. As they had been doing since the incident in the lavatory, they were sitting together in his office, once classes were over for the day, having tea and biscuits. To ensure Harry would meet with him, and to gain the boy's trust so he would open up more, about his

nightmares and the sexual abuse, and eventually about -- he hoped -- the Dursleys, Severus had relaxed the rules for showing Harry pictures of his mother. Now, so long as Harry met with him for an hour between classes and dinner, whether he answered any questions or not, he could see any pictures he liked. Of course, Severus did ask him questions, starting with fairly innocuous ones, such about how his day had gone or if he was enjoying -- or having trouble in -- any of his classes, and getting progressively more personal and serious from there.

This method had borne fruit, obviously, as Harry was now sharing something with Severus that he had not even asked about.

"Harry," he said at last, when it was obvious the boy had closed down. "I would like to know where you got that information." There; he'd not confirmed anything, as he could not, with Albus' oaths of secrecy weighing heavy on him, but he'd not outright accused the boy of making things up, either.

Harry seemed to accept his words as the peace offering they were, and turned to face him again. He refused to meet Severus' eyes, though, the same as he had done for the last two weeks. "Just figured it out, sir," he said quietly, picking at the skin around one thumbnail. "Me and some friends did. Figured out that Fluffy's an, er . . . a cerberus, and's guarding something. And in that vision, of the unicorns, you know? I got the sense that You-Know-Who wanted whatever it was that Fluffy's guarding."

Severus' eyes narrowed. "Was it just a feeling, or did you actually hear His thoughts about this thing?"

"Just a feeling," Harry said. He closed his eyes, as if remembering, and his voice was tight as he continued, "Was all just feelings, really. But some're more clear than others. Like, I knew when he was chasing it that the unicorn blood would keep him alive for a while, but not long enough. And that's when I got the sense about whatever Fluffy's guarding. That he needed it, to make himself live longer."

"Good. Thank you." Severus looked away. This was bad, but he had suspected as much, and he was very glad Harry had told him. "I'll inform the Headmaster--"

"What? No! I--"

The boy's face was so stricken, that Severus interrupted quickly, "Not that you gave me the information, Harry. I wouldn't betray your trust like that. I will only tell him that we need to double check the protections, all right?"

"Yeah, okay." Harry ran a hand over his face and sighed. "Sorry, sir. I didn't mean--"

"It's all right. No need to apologize." Severus drew the packet of pictures out of his desk drawer. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Harry freeze, then sit straighter. "What would you like to see?"

Harry leaned forward eagerly. "The one of Mum at the Quidditch game?"

Severus smiled to himself. He was quite fond of that one, too. He shuffled through the pictures to find the one of that rather cloudy day, where Lily's smile seemed to light up everything around her.

He had just located that picture and brought it to the front of the pack when a hesitant voice said, "I lived in a cupboard."

Very carefully not changing his expression, though his jaw wanted to clench as much as his fists, Severus finished moving the picture to the top of the pile and placed the pictures on his desk. He glanced at Harry to see that the boy was staring at his hands in his lap. "Oh?" he said, the merest hint of curiosity tingeing his tone.

"Yeah. The one under the stairs, where Aunt Petunia kept cleaning things for the house. Was my bedroom till I got my Hogwarts letter, and . . . and where they sent me when I was bad, too. But when the letter came, then they thought someone was watching, so they let me have Dudley's second bedroom."

Still trying not to react too much, or frighten Harry's confession into silence, Severus nodded slowly. "Why did they think someone was watching?" He was almost positive that Albus had not been, or, if he had, Severus almost did not want to know it. He didn't think he could handle it if Albus had known about the horror the boy had been through and had done nothing to aid him.

"Cause of the way the letter was addressed," Harry said, and he moved his chair slightly so he could see the picture Severus had laid out, both of them acting as casual as could be, as if what they were saying meant so very little.

"What way was that?" Severus tilted the picture towards him, just a touch, and when Harry could see it, he smiled, just a touch. Harry reached to take the picture, and Severus let him. He held it out in front of himself like it was a letter. "It said, 'To Mr. H. Potter, The Cupboard under the Stairs, 4 Privet Drive,' and all the rest of it. They were real upset."

"Your aunt and uncle?"

Harry nodded. "Uncle Vernon took the letter and wouldn't let me have it, even though it was mine. He and Aunt Petunia threw us out of the kitchen, me and Dudley, and they were whispering that maybe 'they' were spying on them, since 'they' knew about my cupboard. That night, he came and visited me in my cupboard, but he'd never done that before."

"Did your uncle . . . do anything to you?" Severus asked quietly. He would kill the man without qualms, if he had.

Harry laid the picture flat and once again ran his fingers over the edge, as if he could somehow go through to the other side if he wished it hard enough. His expression was rather wistful as he gazed at his mother. Severus knew, could he see his own expression, it might be the same.

Finally, Harry said, "No. Not really. I mean . . . he told me the letter was addressed to me by mistake, but I said it wasn't, on account of the mention of my cupboard. But he'd burnt it, he said, then told me

he thought my cupboard might be getting a bit small, so I should have Dudley's second bedroom now. I asked him why, but I knew . . . I knew they were feeling guilty, really, 'cause you're not supposed to keep kids in cupboards. I just wanted to hear him say it, and that they were sorry. But he didn't. They weren't. He just he yelled at me to be silent, that I wasn't to ask questions, and I should get my stuff up there straight away. So I did." An odd sort of smile crossed the boy's lips and then was gone just as quickly. "Dudley was awful mad the next day. Screamed a lot and hit Uncle Vernon with his Smeltings stick, and even made himself sick on purpose, but they wouldn't give him back his second bedroom."

Ah. Severus recognized the smile now. Schadenfreude. "So how did you get your letter?" he asked, curious now.

"Hagrid had to bring it to me. Uncle Vernon tried for days to keep them from coming into the house. I got three the day after that first one, and they were addressed to me as being in the smallest bedroom, so the Dursleys were sure someone was spying on them then." Harry seemed to be warming to the subject, at the same time as he continued to look at the photo of the his mother in the stands at the Quidditch pitch. "Then Uncle Vernon drove us all over, and finally rowed us out to this little island in the middle of nowhere, where it was stormy and smelt like seaweed, and all we had were some crisps and bananas. And at midnight, right on the minute of when my birthday started -- I could see Dudley's watch, he'd gotten a digital one on his birthday, and it glowed in the dark -- Hagrid came booming through the door." Harry grinned, shaking his head. "I'd never seen anyone so huge! He gave Dudley a fright, for certain. Then he gave me my letter, told me I was down for Hogwarts since the day I was born. He brought me a birthday cake he'd baked, too, first one I ever had, and even made sure Dudley didn't eat it all, so I got some."

Severus nodded. That last bit jibed with what he'd heard about Hagrid's trip to collect the Boy Who Lived after it was close to the deadline to hear back from students, and Potter had not responded to his official Hogwarts acceptance letter. Severus had sneered then, at the foolishness of arrogant little boys who couldn't be bothered to correspond with their betters . . . but he knew better now.

"And so," Severus said carefully, hopefully, "they still let you stay in the second bedroom after Hagrid brought you home again?"

"Yeah," Harry said. "No more cupboards."

"Not even for punishment?" he asked softly, glancing at the boy beside him. He had not told Harry he'd overheard him talking to his owl about being locked in the cupboard for a week without food. It would not have surprised him to hear the horrid Muggles had used the threat of it at least.

Harry bit his lip and shook his head. "Not yet anyway. I mean . . . I think they still think they're being watched." He pressed his lips together and his face came over all mulish.

"What is it, Harry?" Severus asked gently, though he had a pretty good idea, one which was borne out by Harry's answer.

"Well . . ." A sigh. "Well, sir, if they were watching, the Headmaster or whoever, I mean, if they did see where I was and how they . . . how the Dursleys treated me and such . . ." He trailed off with another sigh.

"Yes?" Severus wanted Harry to ask the question. The boy needed to ask, needed to validate his own perception that what happened to him was wrong.

"Well, why didn't they ever do anything?! Why'd they leave me to get starved and shoved in that filthy cupboard, and for Dudley to beat me up all the time? If they were watching, why didn't anyone care?"

"You want to know why no one cared that you were being treated poorly," Severus repeated. "Why no one from Hogwarts, or the Ministry, came to take you away from such unfit caretakers."

"I . . ." Harry gulped, and for the first time in two weeks, met his gaze. Severus was startled by the depths of pain in those green eyes, the hurt the boy hid so well and so often, but also by the righteous anger that glittered fiercely within. "Yes, sir."

Severus held that hurting, angry boy's gaze and told him as much as he knew. He hoped it was the truth. "I don't believe anyone was watching, truly. I don't know exactly how the yearly letters are addressed, but I think it's an automatic process. I honestly don't think anyone looks at the addresses of the prospective students, so no one would have known that way that you were living in the cupboard. But that's neither here nor there. You're asking about the last ten years, not just about the letter. I believe, I have to believe that, if Professor Dumbledore knew your circumstances, he would have intervened."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Really?"

Even this child of eleven was not fooled by the Headmaster's grandfatherly manner. Harry knew that Gaius Avery had merely been expelled, instead of incarcerated. He knew Albus wanted him to learn Occlumency, which in a child so young, could fracture his mind. He knew Albus had not intervened when it came to keeping Quirrell away from him, either, even when it meant he was not safe at school. Given all this, why should he believe this latest claim?

Once again, he told the boy the truth. Any less would be insulting, to both of them. "I hope so, Harry. I honestly do."

He knew Harry understood, by the calm nod of his head, and his pensive air, and he wished the boy didn't have to weigh his own worth against that of a Dark Lord's destruction. He wished there was an easy way to ask Albus this question . . . or rather, an easy way to get an honest answer out of him.

But if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.

He needed to get Harry away from those Muggles for good. And now that Harry had started telling him about their treatment, he had a much better shot at it. He gave Harry a half smile. "Thank you, Harry. I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to tell me this," he said. "Now, would you like to see another picture?"

Harry nodded eagerly and reached for the pile of photos. "One of you and Mum," he said, and Severus' heart soared.

TBC . . .

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 39

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine! Eh, I'll get over it.

Warnings: language, reference to abuse.

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

He needed to get Harry away from those Muggles for good. And now that Harry had started telling him about their treatment, he had a much better shot at it. He gave Harry a half smile. "Thank you, Harry. I'm glad you felt comfortable enough to tell me this," he said. "Now, would you like to see another picture?"

Harry nodded eagerly and reached for the pile of photos. "One of you and Mum," he said, and Severus' heart soared.

A couple days later, once Harry admitted to Snape about knowing about the third-floor cerberus, and also about how he had lived in a cupboard, when he'd also mentioned his first birthday cake, from Hagrid, Harry decided he really needed to see Hagrid again. It just wasn't right that he hadn't visited the gigantic man at Hogwarts, not once since he'd been sorted. He had to admit, though, Hagrid's reaction to his sorting had made him nervous. Hagrid wouldn't really hold that against him, could he, that he was in Slytherin? But maybe he did. Maybe he thought, like some students from the other houses, that Slytherin housed all the evil people at school.

Really, though, he knew there was only one way to find out for sure what Hagrid thought.

Thus, Harry went to visit his first-ever friend on Friday after classes let out for the day. He asked Millicent to go with him, figuring correctly that she might appreciate meeting the man who had rescued Harry from the Dursleys. And, since Teddy had heard him ask Millie along, he asked Teddy, too, though he hadn't actually expected the

fastidious boy to want to meet the school's rather untidy groundskeeper. Teddy surprised him, though, by quickly agreeing to take the trip down to Hagrid's cottage, which was near the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

Having advised Snape that he was going to go see Hagrid, instead of meet with him to look at pictures as he usually did these last few weeks, Harry led his two friends across the lawn and over a small hill to Hagrid's cottage once Herbology let out. Harry was a bit nervous about just showing up at Hagrid's door, worried that Hagrid would turn him away, maybe call him a Dark Wizard in Training, an epithet Harry had been taunted with a few times -- mostly by Gryffindors -- over the last couple of months. Maybe Hagrid was disappointed in Harry. Maybe he was sorry that he'd given Hedwig to Harry, and demand he give her back. Maybe he'd say as much in front of Harry's Slytherin friends, or refuse to be his friend at all unless Harry gave up Millie and Teddy. . . .

The door opened on his third knock, and Hagrid stood framed by the space. About two seconds later, the man's surprised look vanished, and he said, "'Arry! Wotcher doin' down 'ere?"

"Hi, Hagrid," Harry said, and drew up a deep breath along with his courage. "I, er, hoped I could talk to you? I mean, that we could?" he amended, feeling tongue tied and stupid, as he gestured to his friends. "I mean, I haven't seen you in a long time, and I just wanted to visit."

Hagrid's face immediately broke out in a huge grin. "O' course, 'Arry! C'mon in, all of ye, tha's right; I've some treacle fudge, new made, an' we can 'ave it wit' a nice cuppa."

Relief flooded Harry like water in an overflowing bathtub, pouring over the edges and making him feel warm inside. He grinned up into the face of his friend. "Sounds great."

As Hagrid ushered the three of them into his cottage, Harry took a look around. Hagrid lived simply, with a large table and chairs and a low, but wide bed in one corner the only real furnishings. But the cottage had a homely feel to it, with various knick-knacks, such as

whittled wooden figures -- animals mostly: dragons, wyverns, centaurs and unicorns, especially -- colorful, woven bags stuffed with pungent herbs from his outdoor garden and carved, filigreed boxes of varying sizes (and holding who knew what) on shelves or lined up on the mantle, giving the place a more personal, though uncluttered, touch. The one room cottage smelled odd, though, like dog, -- and the reason why was obvious a moment later, when Fang made his presence known by coming out from under the bed to bark at the trio, then drooling everywhere with his tail thumping madly -- smoked fish and burnt sugar.

Hagrid settled his guests at his huge table and offered them tea and fudge, chatting the whole time as he put a kettle on to boil then laid out gigantic mugs and a tall ewer of milk for the tea: "Haven't seen yer about, 'Arry, not since the sortin'. 'Aven't 'ad much time t'visit with ye. Sorry 'bout that. Been real busy and all. Real busy; important business for Professor Dumbledore, ye know. Good man, Dumbledore."

"Business for the Headmaster?" Teddy asked. "What kind of business?"

"Ah." Pausing as he set out a plate, piled high with wedges of treacle fudge, Hagrid looked embarrassed for a moment. "Shouldn't've said that. I should not 'ave said tha'."

"No, it's okay, Hagrid. Don't worry," Millie quickly assured him, smiling. She seemed very comfortable in the big chair, swinging her legs back and forth to bang her feet on the rungs, and Fang appeared content to have his ears scratched as he rested his head in her lap. "We'll never tell."

Hagrid flashed her a big smile. "Yer a good'un, Mill'cent. A real good'un. Just 'ave some of that fudge, a'right?" he said, and pointed a meaty finger at the plate. "Made it meself this mornin'." He turned back to the fireplace to collect the tea pot.

"Thanks." Millie bit into a piece and spent the next ten minutes trying to chew the sugary treat without losing a tooth. "S'good," she remarked, and Harry shook his head at her, bemused. He liked

treacle quite a lot; it was his favorite pudding, bar none, but Hagrid's effort didn't look very appetizing, and he hadn't eaten any of his portion yet, planning to feed it to Fang. That's where the burnt smell came from, he was sure.

"Does the Headmaster's business have anything to do with the cerberus on the third floor?" asked Teddy. "You know," he added, with deliberate casualness. "Fluffy."

Hagrid dropped the teapot.

"How do yeh know about Fluffy?" he asked, all cheerfulness and friendliness gone from his voice.

"So you do know about it," Teddy said.

Hagrid frowned and pulled out a cloth as wide as a quilt to mop up the mess. "Well, yeah -- he's mine. Bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. I jus' lent him to Dumbledore to guard the. . ."

"Yes?" said Teddy eagerly when Hagrid trailed off.

"Now, don't ask me anymore," said Hagrid gruffly. "That's top secret, that is." He looked over his shoulder to the left, then right, as if someone else might be listening to the conversation while in this very room. He then pointed a large finger at Teddy. "Who told yeh about my Fluffy, then?"

Harry jumped in quickly to rescue his friend. "No one told us, Hagrid. We found out accidentally." He supposed overhearing something might be considered "accidental," if a person didn't go out of their way to listen in.

He sighed; who was he kidding? It was a lie, and he hated needing to lie to Hagrid. He was starting to think that bringing Teddy along might not have been the best idea for fixing his friendship with Hagrid. Given Teddy's doggedness over this issue for the last month or so, Harry knew that his dorm mate wouldn't just let the matter go, but would worry at it like a dog with a new toy. Teddy was the one who'd

overheard Hagrid speak to the Headmaster about the "you-know-what" the cerberus was guarding, and had been intrigued by the mystery ever since, becoming even more so once Harry had told him and Millie about his vision of the unicorn killer. All this, despite the fact that Teddy also seemed to want Harry to tell their Head of House about what he'd sensed from his vision, and kept telling Harry and Millie that, as first years, they shouldn't be responsible for fixing this problem.

He was right, of course.

Then again, Harry himself was intrigued by the mystery involving dead unicorns, a mysterious item being heavily guarded, Quirrell's attack on him and the Baron, and the pain in his scar . . . and not just because it was his life being threatened, although that obviously played a fairly big role.

So . . . Maybe Hagrid could help them discover who was behind the whole thing, focusing on whoever was trying to steal the you-know-what. Somehow, Harry doubted it was the stuttering, bumbling Professor Quirrell; he was too incompetent to be a real thief. Maybe Hagrid could help them thwart the true villain.

Suddenly recalling his first and only time at Gringotts, and Hagrid's little side trip when they were in the tunnels, as well as an article in the Daily Prophet just after school started, Harry put two pieces together and took a chance on his instincts being right.

"Hagrid . . ." Harry gave Teddy a look that asked him to go along with what he said, and the other boy nodded minutely, agreeing. "Have you noticed anything weird about Professor Quirrell this term? Aside from the stuttering, I mean?"

Hagrid shook his shaggy head. "Nah. 'E's same as always. . . . Though, now ye mention it, he never did 'ave tha' stutter b'fore. Picked it up in 'is travels, I guess." Hagrid had put another teapot on to boil, and he now filled their mugs to the rims before easing his large frame into one of his chairs; it barely creaked. "Why ye ask?"

Hesitating only a second, Harry plunged on, "We think someone's trying to steal what Fluffy's guarding. You know, that package you picked up from Gringotts."

Hagrid's eyes grew wide and he pushed his chair back with a loud screech of wooden legs on wood floor. "Now listen to me, all three of yeh -- yer meddlin' in things that don' concern yeh. It's dangerous, and it's nothin' to do with Perfesser Quirrell, I can tell ye that much right now. So you jus' forget my Fluffy, an' yeh forget what 'e's guardin'. That ain't none of your business. It's jus' between Professor Dumbledore and Nicholas Flamel, and ain't no concern of yours at all."

"Aha!" said Millie, having finally unstuck her teeth, and sounding quite triumphant, but whether about the unsticking, or what she was saying, no one knew, "so someone called Nicholas Flamel is involved, is he?"

Hagrid looked furious with himself.

To Harry's regret, despite a fairly nice chat until dinner time, once the unpleasantness of Hagrid's fuming was over, their visit could have gone much better.

All in all, Harry was sure that Hagrid didn't believe him about someone -- likely Quirrell -- trying to steal the item in question, so it was just as well he had already discussed it with Snape. He hoped that Snape really did make sure that the protections on The Thing were double checked, as he certainly did not want Quirrell -- or anyone else with malicious intent -- to get their hands on something that had once needed to be guarded by such secure measures as goblins could provide, and was now guarded by a three-headed hell hound. Not to mention, he figured that Quirrell, having already failed to kill Harry twice, would not hesitate to try again, if it should be within his power to do so. The whatever-it-was was probably something to aid the professor in that job.

After dinner, the three of them chatted together about the "project" and their possible courses of action, going forward. The visit with Hagrid had given them valuable information, Harry was willing to admit. Based on the man's reactions, they reasoned, they now had a

better chance of figuring out what The Thing was. For one thing, from Harry's recollection of his Diagon Alley expedition, The Thing was small enough to fit in Hagrid's palm. Harry told the other two everything he could remember about the package Hagrid had picked up from Gringotts, and they added Nicholas Flamel to their list of "clues," which already included the Unicorn Killer's desire for it, as a means to prolong its life, in a way unicorn blood could not.

They talked until almost curfew, and before they went to bed that night, Teddy suggested they should start looking for references to Nicholas Flamel in the library the next day. Millie, however, suggested that it was their responsibility -- especially given how free Hagrid seemed to be, talking about what the trio knew were supposed to be secrets -- to tell one of their teachers about what they had learned. Their Head of House, specifically.

Harry wasn't sure what to do. He didn't want to get Hagrid in trouble, and since they hadn't learned anything new about the possible thief that Snape didn't already know, he decided to play it by ear.

The next few weeks went by fairly quickly as winter holidays approached. Harry continued to meet with Snape to look at photographs of his mother. Sometimes she was by herself, sometimes with Snape, and sometimes with the friends she had made at school. He noticed, but never mentioned, that Snape had no pictures at all of her with James Potter. Snape had already explained his extreme dislike of Harry's father, and had even apologized for when that dislike had spilled over onto Harry himself, so Harry didn't see any point in bringing up the issue of who she had posed with.

In these meetings, they sometimes talked about school work, and sometimes about other things . . . like when they would start Occlumency lessons -- over winter break, Snape told him, assuming he was staying at Hogwarts -- or how Harry was sleeping and eating - - better, Harry told him, which was not quite a lie -- and how he was getting along with the upper years nowadays, with Gaius gone: Few of them ever spoke to him at all, he reported, except for those on the Quidditch team, and he liked that just fine.

They rarely talked about what had happened with Gaius, except for when that overlapped with Harry's nightmares and he couldn't get away with non-answers, and they spoke even less frequently about Harry's life with the Dursleys. Harry could tell -- and Snape had told him outright, several times -- that Snape wanted him to talk about them. Snape claimed it was so he could present evidence against them to Dumbledore, as proof Harry should not be sent to live with them again. But ten years of living under his uncle's iron rule had taught Harry some (occasionally hard earned) lessons, the first of which was: Don't Tell.

Harry knew with absolute clarity that, if he told, he would be in deep, deep trouble, and would likely spend an eternity in his cupboard, regardless of whether anyone was "watching" the Dursleys or not. There was no way in the world he would test Rule One, no matter how many promises Snape made that nothing bad would happen to him if he told.

Harry figured he was probably already doomed for saying as much about them as he had. Which is why, when the sheet went up on the bulletin board in the Slytherin Common Room, for those who would be staying at Hogwarts for the holidays, Harry signed it immediately. He was the first one, and he knew already he'd be the only one from Slytherin first years, at least.

Within fifteen minutes of him putting name to paper, of course, Blaise Zabini had started to take the mickey. "Awww, that's so sad. Don't you think that's sad? Not even Mugglescum want poor widdle Potter in their home," he teased in a sing-song voice from across the room, then topped it off with a sneer. "Not that I'm surprised . . ."

"Shut it, Zabini," Teddy said tiredly from his seat at the corner table, where a bunch of them were revising for a Transfiguration exam the next day. "No one cares about what surprises you. If they did, they would have cared about your mother on the day you were born."

Zabini's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Mudblood-loving, ball-sucking pig!" he snarled. "Just wait--"

"Till your bollocks drop?" Teddy interrupted in the same bored voice. "Let us alone to work in the meantime, will you?"

Harry's face grew hot in embarrassment, even as Draco and his two goons sniggered, and Millie raised a hand to her forehead in a mock swoon. "Gracius, Theodore, such language!"

"So sayeth the Queen of Vulgarity," Teddy shot back, and Millie stuck out her tongue at him. With a snort and a leer, Teddy offered to show her where to put "that bulbous thing," and in the laughter that followed, Blaise Zabini stomped out of the room, forgotten. For now.

Harry was just as glad; he was tired of Zabini's lowbrow remarks about his family and his heritage, no matter how true they might be. He was glad he had friends like Millie and Teddy, but he wished they didn't need to stand up for him quite so often.

Over the last few months, Harry had learned that inside Slytherin House, the Snakes could be callous and cruel. He'd had to stand up for Millie a few times against some of the other girls, Firsties as well as upper years, who teased her about her weight and her looks, and said how she'd never have a husband except that her parents could afford to arrange a marriage for her. And Teddy had come under fire from other Slytherins, as Draco had, too, for the choices their fathers had made after the war which ended in 1981, when Harry survived the Killing Curse and Voldemort had vanished. One of the sixth year boys in particular, Oskar Dolohov, seemed to hold a special grudge against Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father, because his own father had been in Azkaban for ten years, whereas the elder Malfoy had escaped prosecution by saying he had only done the Dark Lord's bidding whilst under the Imperius Curse.

On the other hand, outside of their common rooms and dorms, Slytherins stood together as one when faced with the slander, mockery and occasional bullying from the other Houses; there was no denying that.

After the laughter died down, Teddy nudged Harry's side with an elbow and, without looking at him, murmured, "You know you're welcome to join me and my father for the holidays."

"I know," Harry replied just as quietly. "But I told you, I'm meant to do some new training with Professor Snape."

"I wish you'd tell me what that was, so we could get some books or something, to prepare you."

"Can't," Harry started, and Teddy joined in for the rest of his statement, knowing it by rote by now: "It's a secret." Harry grinned. "Well, it is. And I promised not to tell."

One corner of Teddy's lip went up as he gave Harry a sly, yet casual look, then nodded. "Seems like you can learn, after all."

"Learn what?" Harry asked, frowning.

"To trust an adult. A professor, too!"

"Yeah, well . . ." Harry shrugged, embarrassed again.

"Hey, don't worry, Harry," Teddy said, grinning at him. "I won't tell Bulstrode. You know she'd have a coronary."

"Never tell me what?" Millie called out from across the table.

"Never mind," Harry and Teddy said in unison.

Millie crumpled up her Transfiguration notes and threw the wad at the two of them, then sighed dramatically. "Boys!"

Later, when they were getting ready for bed, Teddy pulled a book out of his trunk and, after checking to make sure no one else was in their dorm room, handed it to Harry. The book was heavy, as thick as Harry's hand. The red leather cover was embossed with gold lettering that read Protection from the Earth Up: The Elements and You.

"What's this?"

"A book."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Very funny. What's it for?"

"Reading." At Harry's look, Teddy held up his hands. "Okay, okay. After we talked a while ago, about you being able to protect yourself better, I've been doing some research, to figure out what we could do so you wouldn't have to worry every second that you were going to be attacked. But then that shit with Avery happened," Teddy eyed Harry as if he might bolt from the room, and it was an act of sheer will for Harry to not flinch at the sound of that bastard's name, "and I didn't get a chance to look more into it until recently." Teddy worried his lip briefly then said, "Anyway, I found this book, and it has some . . . interesting ideas in it for how you might better protect yourself. Just read it, okay? But don't let anyone else see it; it's not exactly Firsties material. We can talk more after the break, if you want."

Harry stared at his friend, not knowing quite what to say. Finally, he settled on, "All right. Thanks."

Teddy nodded, and headed over to his bed, so when Draco entered the dorm, Harry slid the book into his own trunk, to examine later.

For a long time, Harry lay awake thinking about the book, thinking about the upcoming holiday break, and thinking about the people he needed to protect himself from, if he didn't want to end up as dead as a unicorn. Thus, it was no surprise that he found Professor Snape at his bedside in the deep of night, telling him he had suffered another nightmare, even if it was one he could not recall.

TBC . . .

A/N: A hearty thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! I'm not terribly pleased with this chapter -- it feels a bit to fillerish to me -- but the next two or three will cover the holiday break, with the start of Occlumency training, holiday gifts, and a trip or three to a magic mirror . . . so, lots of fun stuff coming up!

My apologies on the continuation of slow posting times, for Better Be Slytherin as well as my other stories. Unfortunately, I've been doing

fairly poorly, health-wise, and even when I've had the time, which I've not had as much of lately, I've not had much energy for writing. I hope things improve soon, for me and my writing, and I thank you all for your well wishes; they're much appreciated.

My first poll is closed and the results are in: Over half of those who responded wanted me to keep writing on all my stories, cycling through them as I've been doing, rather than concentrating on any particular one and neglecting the others till that one was finished. So it has been written, so it shall be done! We'll just keep on keeping on. Hugs and hot cocoa for all y'all!

Update: I have a new Yahoo group dedicated to readers of all my stories, where you can ask questions about plot, characters, what-have-you, get updates of new chapters, or chat with other readers. Please join, via the link on my profile page! We're waiting for you.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 40

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine! Eh, I'll get over it.

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

For a long time, Harry lay awake thinking about the book, thinking about the upcoming holiday break, and thinking about the people he needed to protect himself from if he didn't want to end up as dead as a unicorn. Thus, it was no surprise that he found Professor Snape at his bedside in the deep of night, telling him he had suffered another nightmare, even if it was one he could not recall.

Once Severus had calmed Potter down from his fright from his nightmare, he sat with the boy for a while, watching him go back to sleep. He knew the boy wasn't getting enough rest, because of nightmares and the fear of attack hanging constantly over his head. Quietly, he told Potter that their upcoming training might help him fend off nightmares better, as it had once done for Severus himself. He was pleased to see the information calmed Potter a bit more, even eliciting a wan smile from the boy.

In the morning, of course, it was back to business as usual, with scowls in the classroom and criticisms of potions, lest anyone think he played favorites, especially to the Brat Who Lived to Ensnare His Conscience.

A few days later, Severus was glad to see the end of the term, glad to see the backs of most of the dunderheads who graced Hogwarts' halls, at least for a couple of weeks, and glad he only had three Slytherins to worry about until the new term began: Potter and a pair of sisters, from third and fifth year, whose parents were visiting family out of the country and could not afford to take the girls along. It would be a quiet Christmas, he hoped.

OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

Christmas fell only two days after the children left for their homes on the Hogwarts Express. The last thing Severus expected on Christmas morning, at barely half-past the crack of dawn, was Harry Potter in his doorway. The boy held up a book so he could see the title, one, of course, he knew already, having wrapped the gift only the day before.

Oddly, the lower half of Potter's body was missing.

"Happy Christmas, sir! You gave me a present!" Potter told him unnecessarily, brandishing Keating's *The Occluded Mind* like a shield and grinning like a maniac.

"So I did," Severus replied. "Where are your legs?"

"I got loads of presents!" the Brat told him, which didn't have anything to do with his question, as far as he could tell. Perhaps the strain had finally gotten to the child, and his mind had snapped.

"Was one of the gifts new legs, perchance?"

Potter giggled, a sound Severus had never heard him make before. Indeed, he looked positively radiant, aglow with happiness and holiday cheer, and Severus was glad he had decided, this once, to abandon his credo to never bestow gifts upon any of his Snakes, lest they think him soft. "No, sir, but one of them was an Invisibility Cloak, see?" He pulled off the cloak completely then held it up again, so Severus could take in the whole effect, which he did, even going so far as to recall the last instance he had "seen" Potter the Elder using the infernal device during a prank. The memory was not a good one. "And guess what?" Harry continued. "The note said it used to be . . . er . . ."

"Your father's," Severus completed, as the horror of that statement dawned completely. Though why he should have thought Albus was smarter than to do such a monumentally stupid thing as to give this cloak to this child at this time was beyond him. There were so many ways this situation could end badly that tallying the possibilities was enough to give him a headache. Albus should have known better, honestly.

"Yeah." The boy tugged the offending garment fully away from his appendages and balled it up as his cheeks reddened. Severus watched his eyes, though, and Potter did not seem angry at his professor's tone, but . . . embarrassed? "How'd you know, sir? I mean, I don't even know who sent it; the note just said the cloak was my Dad's and that I should use it well."

Severus sneered. "You put on an article of magical clothing without any idea of who sent it?"

"No, sir!" the boy retorted. He looked hurt suddenly, as if Severus should know he was not as foolhardy as he appeared. "I mean, er . . . I did, yes, but I went through the spells like me'n Teddy did on the Frogs first. And it wasn't cursed. I checked."

With one eyebrows lifted, Severus said coolly, "You do, of course, realize that curses for apparel are substantially different than those for comestibles."

"I . . . what?"

Shaking his head, Severus chuckled softly and took pity on the boy at last, ushering him into his rooms and out of the cold corridor. It was not the first time Harry had come to his rooms, as the seating here was more comfortable for staring at photos than the hard chairs in his office, and Harry immediately settled on the worn, brown sofa in front of the fire where he usually sat, before looking up at him with confusion. After ordering the boy some cocoa and waiting till a House Elf delivered it, Severus repeated, "Comestibles. That which is consumed. By eating," he elucidated at the boy's continued blank look. "Food."

"Oh!" Potter smiled shyly and sipped at his cocoa, making a soft sound of appreciation. "Yes, sir, I know. But I still have one of the main books we used out from the library, and lots of the spells are transfig . . . tranform . . . well, trans-something-or-other by just changing or adding a word or two. Teddy and me were--"

"Ted--" Severus interrupted, then cleared his throat. "Theodore and I."

At the correction, Potter blinked owlishly at him then smirked. "Yes, sir. Teddy and I were going over some of those ones before he left. They're dead useful."

A smile tugged at his lips, but he took a sip of tea instead. "I daresay. Of whose other largesse were you the recipient this morning?" He smirked again at the boy's confusion, pleased to continue adding to his abysmal vocabulary, and added, "Who else gave you gifts?"

"Oh! Millie gave me new gloves for Quidditch, and Teddy gave me a book, too, like you did, sir, but on Charms. Hagrid gave me a flute; I think he carved it himself!" Potter looked immeasurably pleased at the prospect, and Severus recalled that the boy claimed Hagrid as his first friend in the Wizarding world. Good; Hagrid had come through for the boy. "And, um, Hermione gave me more Chocolate Frogs. I've got a decent collection of cards, now. About six of Professor Dumbledore, though."

Severus nodded, stating (and then explaining what he meant) that the Headmaster was indeed ubiquitous. He did not bother asking if the boy had received anything from his relatives. He already knew the answer, if their previous efforts were anything to go by.

Eyes still shining in happiness, Harry continued to chatter at him about his gifts, including thanking Severus several more times for the book. Once the boy had finished his cocoa, however, Severus ushered him back out of his rooms, with the admonition to eat more than just candy today, and that they were to begin Occlumency training on the morrow, so it would be in his best interests to at least look at the book by Keating, especially the index.

He did not tell the boy that he had tucked two pictures of Lily into that index, as he preferred not to be the recipient of another round of overwhelming thanks.

Just then, however, the boy said, "Oh, thanks! I almost forgot." He gave Severus another of his shy smiles before he pulled a small, flat package from the frontispiece of the book and pressed it into Severus' hands. Biting his lip briefly, Harry said, "You've got to

enlarge it first. Sorry; it's not much. Happy Christmas, Professor." Then he fled.

Puzzled, Severus stood stock still, listening to his door close with a quiet click, before he fully realized what had happened. Potter had given him a gift.

Potter had given him a gift.

Potter had given him a gift.

It was completely unexpected. After a few moments of consideration, however, he realized he should have expected something of the sort from this boy. Such a gesture was just like him. Just like this kind, amusing, diffident, unassuming, starved-for-affection little boy. How like Lily he was, in so many ways, right down to his occasional bouts of temper. Oh how she had raged when they were in school, sometimes, at the injustices against Muggleborns (like her) and half-bloods (like him). He remembered, suddenly, the first gift she had ever given him, and he darted into his bedroom to find it, needing desperately to see her drawing again.

After rooting around in various drawers, he finally found the pencil sketch tucked in the back of his wardrobe in a small box of odds and ends. She had done his face at the ripe age of ten, and even then her talent for shading (his nose) and proportion (his mouth) was apparent. She had progressed quite far over the years, of course, and . . . somewhere, he had an "updated" portrait she'd done of him when they were Fifth Years. It had been the last gift she ever gave him, for his 16th birthday in January 1976, six short months before their relationship had gone the way of all meat.

He realized he still held Harry's gift in his left hand, and he now sat back on his heels to open the small package, about the size and thickness of a Hogwarts letter. The wrapping was plain parchment that had been colored green and silver with a simple charm -- but one not officially taught to students. That the boy had gone so far as to learn a new spell for the wrapping touched him. Then he recalled that Harry had said to enlarge the gift, too, and the Shrinking Charm was

definitely a second year spell.

After he reversed the charm, the package was easily twice as large as before, maybe three times, but was still just as thin. Severus removed the wrapping carefully, wondering what an eleven-year-old considered "not much," and gasped when he saw what lay within.

Lily's son had drawn him, too.

Severus looked from one picture to the other and noted the similarities and differences, even accounting for the twenty year span in his age when he was drawn. Harry's effort was, at once, a more complicated drawing than the one Lily had done, but understated and seemingly simplistic, with the darker ink lines coming together just so to complete the whole.

The boy's pen and ink sketch must have been mostly from memory, as it showed Severus at work, hovering over a cauldron with tiny wisps of vapor timelessly rising from its depths, and the boy could not have sketched him in this pose whilst in class and not been caught out. Using perspective quite well in the background he chose, he depicted a portion of Severus' office, with its shelves full of jars and bottles of ingredients, rather than the boring chalkboard of the Potions' classroom. In the figure of Severus himself, the boy had rendered his robes brilliantly, catching his trademark billow in a few short strokes. But the best work by far was in how he drew Severus' face, using subtle changes in tone to indicate eye sockets and the planes of his heavy nose and brows. And you could see the passion Severus had for his work in the pinpoints of dark fire in his eyes.

A marvelous effort, indeed, for one so young, not to mention untaught, since he knew very well the Dursleys would never have purchased lessons for their unwanted nephew.

He would need to tell Harry as much. And perhaps, show him his mother's drawing, too. Tomorrow perhaps, as a reward for Occlumency, if that lesson went well. He pursed his lips, considering, and sighed. Perhaps he would show the boy the drawing even if the

lesson did not go well, which was more likely, given Harry's age and the emotional strain he was already under.

Cursing Albus for a meddling fool once again, with no regard for Harry's welfare, Severus returned to his sitting room where he finished his tea before picking up a bit from the morning's excitement. The crocheted throw Harry had confiscated while sipping cocoa was folded and replaced on the back of the sofa, and he banished the dishes to the kitchen. Severus moved the few gifts he had received -- from Minerva and Albus, in addition to Harry -- into his study, where he tucked one of the books into the space reserved for it, next to others by that particular author, and left the other on his desk till he had the chance to peruse it more thoroughly and decide how to catalogue it. Harry's drawing, after a moment's thought, he rested on its bottom edge against the back wall of his desk so he could see it while working on his lesson plans; a form of inspiration, perhaps, he thought with a smile.

Finally, he luxuriated in a long bath before putting on dress robes and gracing the Great Hall -- and its overblown Christmas dinner -- with his presence. For all the raucous, unfettered joy of it, which rarely gave him anything but a headache, he might not have bothered.

The children all ate too much candy and pudding, as he knew they would, and were exponentially louder as a result as the afternoon wore on. All ten of those staying at Hogwarts over the holidays, even the two Ravenclaw Seventh Years and the one lonely Hufflepuff Fourth Year, were far too filled with cheer for Severus' sensibilities -- excepting Percival Weasley, perhaps, a Gryffindor Prefect who had other unfortunate personality issues to more than make up for that lack, including a nauseating tendency to kiss arse.

The Christmas crackers were their usual booming, smoky annoyance, and the Headmaster showed off his new flowered bonnet with glee at dinner, while Hagrid got redder and redder in the face as he called for more wine, finally kissing Minerva on the cheek. To Severus' amazement, she merely giggled and blushed instead of clocking the lout as he deserved, while her top hat wobbled to and fro. He had rarely seen her so deep in her own cups in front of the children, and hoped for her sake that she either forgot the incident entirely or, at

least did nothing even more foolish before she had a chance to sober up. He made a mental note to refuse her a hangover potion in the morning unless she asked very, very nicely. And brought a bribe.

Peripherally, Severus noted that Potter was the recipient of a Wizard's chess set from a cracker, among other treats, and wondered if the boy even knew how to play. Likely not, he thought. Thus it was to his surprise that he found, late in the afternoon, after the children came in from a rowdy snowball fight -- which Severus had watched surreptitiously from an upper window to make sure no one (Potter, for instance) was injured -- and most had dispersed to their common rooms, Harry seated at one of the currently shrunken tables in the Great Hall, playing Wizard's chess against the youngest Weasley boy.

As far as he could recall from the previous few months, Potter and Weasley did not get along. Weasley had been one of Potter's most vocal attackers all last term, with his frequent accusations of how Harry must be on his way to becoming a Dark Wizard due to his placement in Slytherin. Severus appreciated neither the sentiment nor the preconceptions that fueled it.

Making his way toward them, Severus decided to find out what this sudden camaraderie was all about. Perhaps it was nothing more than the two boys being the only children in their year to be staying over the break. Or perhaps Weasley liked Wizard's chess more than clinging to his prejudices. Whatever the reason, Severus was glad to see Harry apparently enjoying himself, but he hoped the boy would not put too much faith in the redhead's current favor. He was bound to be disappointed.

With that in mind, he stopped near the boys to watch a few moves (ostensibly) and to glare at the Weasley boy (more genuinely.) On the board, Harry's pieces were in full out retreat. From the way he was softly (and uncertainly) entreating his pieces to listen to his commands, it was clear he had never played before.

Despite not needing to concentrate overmuch on the game, a couple moves passed before the oblivious redhead noticed one of his professors standing across the table from him. Not surprising; after all, the imbecile never paid attention to anything going on around him,

which was why he was as much a menace in Potions as his year-and housemate, Longbottom. Between those two blundering idiots, the floor and ceiling of his classroom would need to be re-tiled over the summer, simply due to the number of exploding and/or melting cauldrons for which they were responsible. He wished he could take the cost of the damage out of their hides, and hoped only that neither caused injury to their classmates before the year was out, especially as his Slytherins shared that class with them.

"I can't believe you don't know how to play," Weasley was saying in a low voice while shaking his head mournfully. "Or I wouldn't, if you weren't so pants at the game. You're really hopeless, aren't you? Can't wait till I tell the twins how I beat Harry Potter at Wizard's chess!"

The back of Harry's neck was red in a way Severus recognized meant he was upset at the string of insults but unwilling to say so. As he knew Harry had been penalized for speaking out by the Muggles who raised him, this was hardly a surprise. He could also tell, by the way the boy's shoulders tensed, that Harry had realized almost immediately that Severus was standing behind him and was listening to every word. Also not a surprise, given his upbringing.

Severus had his best sneer ready for when the redhead's face finally rose to meet his. O, how glorious was the sight of blood draining from that wee freckled face! He had the power, he snickered to himself, to terrorize ickle firsties. How low he had fallen, truly.

"P-p-professor?" the boy asked with a gulp, though his blood flooded his cheeks swiftly enough once again, when Severus' lip curled just a little bit more. This Weasley, unlike his older brothers, was quick to anger and would be easy to provoke into some brash sentiment of bravado. Oh, he did hope so; there was little on this earth sweeter to Severus than assigning detention to a Gryffindor on Christmas Day.

"I did not realize Professor Quirrell's affectation was c-c-contagious," Severus mocked. A quiet expulsion of breath was all he heard from Potter, but it was enough to let him know the boy was trying not to laugh, even as he bowed his head as if not wanting to see what was about to happen.

Weasley's cheeks reddened further. "We're just playing a game. Sir. Well, I'm teaching him how to play."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "So I see." Sometimes the most innocuous statements could produce profound results.

Weasley proved his hypothesis correct by scowling darkly, then murmured something under his breath, almost too soft to hear.

But Severus had honed his hearing over the last dozen years of listening for potential explosions in his classroom, and caught the words: "can't see how," "anything," and "greasy." He could extrapolate the rest. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for your disrespect, Mr. Weasley."

The boy was on his feet in an instant. "That's not fair!"

"Life rarely is," Severus opined. This young whelp could take a lesson or two from Harry on that truism, if nothing else.

The boy's chin came up. "You can't take points from me. I didn't even do anything!"

Severus' nostrils flared, and he carefully crossed his arms so as to not reach across the table and strangle the noisome creature. "Unless you were subjected to the Ventriloquist Charm, you certainly are responsible for what comes out of your mouth." He made a show of looking around the otherwise empty Hall. "And since even you can see that no one is here to have cast the spell, one must assume you moved your lips of your own volition."

"I wasn't even talking to you!" the boy snarled.

With a sneer, Severus used a soft, cutting tone. "Indeed, the case could be made that an idiot such as yourself is incapable of holding a conversation at all, Mr. Weasley. Shall I use small words so your small brain can keep up? Your words offended me. In fact, you are being rude again, right now. Ten more points from Gryffindor. That's thirty, I believe. I can make it an even fifty, if--"

"No!" the wretch said quickly. His hands were clenched into fists as he glared at the chessboard instead of his professor. Through gritted teeth, he said, "No, sir. Sorry. I didn't mean it."

Not quite the apology he might have hoped for, but Severus inclined his head sharply and strode away. Not quite fast enough, though, to miss the last invective Weasley spat towards Harry in a low hiss, even as he shoved away from the table: "Should've known. You Slytherins are all alike. Have fun in the dungeons all alone, Snotter."

Severus sighed as he left the Great Hall. Apparently he had made things even worse for Harry, instead of better. Damn. What was that old saying about good intentions . . . ?

TBC . . .

A/N: A hearty thank you to everyone who reads and reviews! And Happy Spring, for all of you (including me) in the northern hemisphere! As my Dear ol' Da used to say:

"Spring, spring, beautiful spring; the bird is on the wing!
--Don't be absurd; the wing is on the bird. . . ."

I have a new Yahoo group called Better Be Slytherin, dedicated to readers of all my stories, where you can ask questions about plot, characters, what-have-you, get updates of new chapters, or chat with other readers about various points in the stories. Please feel free to join, via the link on my profile page! We're waiting for you.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 41

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine! In fact, several sentences (and even a paragraph or so of description of the Christmas feast) have been lifted wholesale from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, by JKR.

Warnings: language

A/N: This chapter covers the same time frame as the one previous, though it is, of course, from Harry's point of view instead of Snape's.

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

Once Severus had calmed Potter down from his fright from his nightmare, he sat with the boy for a while, watching him go back to sleep. He knew the boy wasn't getting enough rest, because of nightmares and the fear of attack hanging constantly over his head. Quietly, he told Potter that their upcoming training might help him fend off nightmares better, as it had once done for Severus himself. He was pleased to see the information calmed Potter a bit more, even eliciting a wan smile from the boy.

In the days that followed, before the start of Christmas break, Harry decided to return to an activity he had once found some relief in doing, while living with the Dursleys: drawing. The cupboard walls, from the time he was perhaps three years old, until he was eleven, had been his canvass in addition to being his prison. Inside his cupboard, he had few diversions from staring at the walls or listening to the Dursleys talking, moving about, and otherwise living their lives on the other side of that locked door, where he was not permitted to be, nor even wanted. So he drew to make the walls around him more interesting. More like a home.

The first thing he had ever drawn was with a bit of green crayon, no larger than his pinky finger, which he'd found behind the radiator while scrubbing the kitchen floor. He'd written "HARYS ROOM" in block letters to the left of the door inside the cupboard, then colored in every other letter. He'd left the others empty till he could find

another color to fill them, wanting, even at age three or so, for the sign to be aesthetically pleasing. Once he had started day school and learned the correct way to spell his name, he had been mortified at his jarring mistake, and he'd drawn a new sign on the underside of a stair, with fancier blocking this time, as well as an apostrophe. But his first effort would always be there, all the same.

At first Harry had used broken crayons, then pencil nubs or ballpoint pens when he could get them, to draw anything he liked on the dark underside of the stairs and the unpainted walls of his "room." After all, what his aunt or uncle could not see could not get him in trouble, and they had never bothered to go into his cupboard, into the freak's room. Why would they? When he was very young, he had started with stick figures, but they had odd, misshapen heads. Still, he drew them in scenes he knew intimately, such as weeding the garden, cooking at the stove, or painting the shed.

Only in his drawings was he safe to dream of other places, of being somewhere or someone else. Only on those walls was he allowed to pretend that his life was different than what the Dursleys dictated for him. Flowers in his imagined garden were allowed fantastical colors, and the shed he had drawn when he was almost five was striped fantastically, like a rainbow, even though it was proportionally perfect. As he got older and gained access to them, Harry favored pencils over crayons, for the control they gave him, and also for the ability to add depth to his work through shading and contours and stuff. He had never had the chance to use ink until he had come to Hogwarts, though, and so, when he decided to do some drawing in late December, to give his hands something to do while his mind relaxed, he experimented with the form.

It was not until the day before Christmas that he decided to give one of his new creations to Professor Snape. After he'd done a quick sketch of Snape at a cauldron yesterday, Harry had been experimenting with perspective, using the professor's office and its rows of bottles and jars to practice backgrounds. Looking at the sketch now, he frowned briefly. He was sitting cross-legged on his bed with the curtains closed, the sketchpad -- which he had sent away for, via Hedwig, several weeks ago -- balanced on his knees. A bottle of ink rested against his bare toes. Only a couple other

Slytherins were staying for the winter holidays, and they were upper years, so he didn't have to worry about being interrupted in his dorm, but he liked the feel of the curtains around him when he was drawing. They kept him away from prying eyes, just like the safety of his old cupboard.

No, he decided, Professor Snape's eyes were all wrong. Using another sheet of parchment, he sketched several sets of eyes until he had some that were the right shape. For another hour, he worked on highlights and shading of that pair until he could see how he wanted them to look in his drawing. On the inside walls of his cupboard, he tried to group sets of detail work together -- eyes, hands, mouths and such -- so he could work on particular issues he had with drawing until he liked how they came out, and could compare and contrast them with each other.

Now, working carefully, he eased the details of the eyes into his sketch of the professor, smoothing out rough patches or cleaning the parchment with a scraper only when absolutely necessary. He had been drawing for years now, and rarely needed to go over work like that, but ink was still a new medium for him, and he made more mistakes now than he had for quite some time with pencils, even colored ones. It was after eleven at night on Christmas Eve when the sketch was done to his satisfaction.

Once he'd put away his drawing supplies, he wrapped the sketch cautiously with thin paper he had learned to charm into different colors. Millie had suggested the charm after they had been talking about Christmas presents a week ago, bemoaning the fact that neither of them had much spare pocket money to purchase gift wrap. Millie even told him the title of the book he could find the spell in: Lyman Lemarda's Festive Spells for All Occasions. Her mother had given her a copy when she got her acceptance letter to Hogwarts, and she loaned the book to Harry for winter break.

While flipping through the book for the coloring charm, Harry came across a Shrinking Spell, designed to make it easier to carry multiple items, or to tuck large packages into smaller pockets or bags. Harry skimmed the informational notes on the page opposite the spell. Each spell or charm had a story on its origins, a combination of legends,

old wives tales and Lemarda's own research, and as Harry read further, he found that Lemarda claimed this version of the Shrinking Spell had actually been created by Saint Nicholas, who had once delivered tons of toys to children every Christmas. Harry wasn't sure about that -- but then, he'd stopped believing in Santa Claus long before he'd learned that magic was real . . . not that he'd ever received any gifts from him either way. Still, he grinned internally at the idea that he was using a spell for his gifts that the "Jolly Old Elf" had used on his own. Harry practiced the spell a few times on plain sheets of parchment before he cast it at the wrapped drawing. When he finished, the package was no larger than the front cover of the book.

Not until he was writing out the tag for the gift did Harry suffer a pang of nerves about whether he should actually give it to the professor or not. From the Dursleys, he knew students sometimes gave gifts to teachers at the holidays, or he knew Muggles did anyway. Dudley had given gifts to his teachers every year, expensive ones purchased by Aunt Petunia, of course, and wrapped up fancily to make the best impression. Harry had figured they were more bribes than anything, like maybe if the teachers liked Ol' Dudders' presents enough, they wouldn't fail him. Too bad it had never worked.

Harry didn't know, though, what the tradition was here at Hogwarts. None of his Housemates had mentioned anything about giving gifts to any of the professors, never mind to Professor Snape. And Professor Snape seemed to like his privacy, too; would he be annoyed that Harry gave him something? Or maybe he'd be embarrassed, thinking that Harry was trying to turn him into a father figure or something stupid like that. Harry knew that could never happen; he didn't even want a new father. But the professor had helped him out of a few pretty bad jams, and they'd shared all that time looking at pictures of his Mum and stuff. But what if he thought Harry was trying to bribe him for a better grade?

With a sigh, Harry crumpled up the tag and threw it in the bin, then stuffed the shrunk, wrapped gift into his trunk. He was new to present giving, altogether, and he didn't want to mess things up with Snape. He had never had friends to give gifts to before, either, and he hoped he had done that right, at least. Earlier this evening, he had sent

presents out with Hedwig, to take to both Millie and Teddy's houses by morning. He'd also given a gift to Draco Malfoy before he left for the holiday, since the boy was always bragging about how many protections his manor had, and Harry didn't want Hedwig to get caught in any weird anti-Potter owl wards the Malfoys might have put up on Christmas Day. Draco had not opened the gift -- a pair of professional Quidditch racing gloves done in green leather -- but he had thanked Harry in that almost shy way the blond boy had, whenever he expected someone to be taking the piss, but then they paid him a compliment instead. Also, just before she had left for the train home the other day, Harry had given Hermione a present to take with her, since he wasn't sure how her Muggle parents would react to owl post at Christmas, and didn't want them to have kittens on what was supposed to be a festive day. Tomorrow at dinner, he would give Hagrid the drawing he had made of Fang snoozing in front of the hearth, done with pen and ink just like the one he had drawn of the professor. He didn't feel too shy about giving Hagrid a gift; after all, the big man had given Hedwig to him, so he figured he could give a present back without trouble.

Still undecided about his gift for the Potions professor, Harry bunked down for the night. To keep the worst of his nightmares at bay, he ran through one of the simple meditation exercises Snape had taught him over the last couple weeks. He certainly didn't want Snape to have to rouse him from bad dreams on Christmas Eve. He had not dreamed about being attacked by Avery much lately, and he was just as glad to put all of what bastard had done to him out of his mind for good. Instead, however, he kept having dreams of Quirrell -- or was it Voldemort? -- looming over him in what felt like cavernous, dark places, his snake-slit eyes the color of blood. In the darkness, Quirrell-mort hissed threats towards Harry in Parseltongue, the sound making the boy's hair stand on end and his heart clench painfully, while he scrabbled frantically for some way to escape. He didn't have the dreams every night, but often enough.

Tonight, though, was Christmas Eve, and Harry finally fell asleep, looking forward to the next day and the food and the fun, but not expecting any presents at all for himself. When he woke early in the morning, however, the first thing he saw was a small pile of packages at the foot of his bed.

He had to rub the sleep out of his eyes twice before he could believe what he was seeing. Presents! For him! He scrambled out from under his quilts and gaped again at the pile before he snatched up one of the packages as if it might disappear if he wasn't fast enough.

The tag read: To Harry, From Your One-time Secret Friend, Hermione

Ha! She'd finally signed her name to something, he thought with a snicker, then ripped off the wrapping as he had seen Dudley do so many times before, on Christmas and birthdays and bunches of other occasions. More chocolate frogs! Harry tore one open and shoved the treat into his mouth before he could stop himself. His first real Christmas present ever! It tasted great. While the chocolate dissolved in his mouth, he took a look at the card and saw the picture of Albus Dumbledore. With a frown, he tossed the card onto his bedside table and reached for another present. He already had plenty of that card.

This package was from Millie. He laughed when he opened the package of new Quidditch gloves, almost the exact same ones as he had gotten for Draco. The next parcel was wrapped in thick brown paper, and scrawled across it was To Harry, from Hagrid. Inside was a roughly cut wooden flute. Hagrid had obviously whittled it himself. Harry blew into it -- it sounded a bit like an owl. He smiled softly to himself, hoping Hedwig was okay, and reached for the next one, a very small parcel which contained a note: We received your message and enclose your Christmas present. From Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia.

Taped to the note was a fifty-pence piece. "Nice," Harry drawled. Still, it was better than a used tissue or a bent coat hanger. Maybe next summer, he could get a lemonade at the drug store, at his aunt and uncle's expense. The next present was from Teddy, a book on Charms, and then there was another book shaped object, and Harry stared at the card for a long moment before he could put it down. It read: To aid your future studies. Happy Christmas, Harry. From S. S.

It could only be Professor Snape. Severus Snape, as Harry had heard him referred to by the Bloody Baron. The professor had given him a present. He had given Harry a present.

Surely that meant he would accept a present from Harry, too, didn't it? Harry jumped from bed and yanked the wrapped package out of his trunk faster than you could say Jack Frost. He quickly penned a tag to attach to the present, which he'd give the professor just as soon as . . .

He stopped a half moment later, realizing he hadn't even opened the professor's gift! Shaking his head, he sat back on his bed, holding the book-like shape close to his chest -- which was aching strangely, as if the space were hollow -- for another few heartbeats, feeling like something was clogging up his throat. Not like it was choking him, not quite. But almost. Letting out a tense breath, Harry peeled the paper away to find Oscar Keating's *The Occluded Mind*. A quick look through the table of contents let him know the book was one of a series done by this guy Keating, about such mind magic as Occlumency and Legilimency, the former of which Harry was supposed to start learning soon.

Feeling utterly warmed by this last present, he almost missed the one remaining package, but noticed it just as he was about to get off his bed again. Harry picked it up and felt it. It was very light. He unwrapped the parcel, and something fluid and silvery gray went slithering to the floor where it lay in gleaming folds. A note fluttered down on top of it, and Harry seized the note to read, without touching the material; he wasn't stupid.

Written in narrow, loopy writing he had never seen before were the following words: Your father left this in my possession before he died. It is time it was returned to you. Use it well. A Very Merry Christmas to you.

There was no signature.

Harry stared at the note, then back at the shiny material. He knew what Teddy would say, and furthermore, what Snape would say. Thus, he spent the next little while casting various hex and curse

detection spells at the thing, and nothing appeared wrong with it. Finally, hesitantly, Harry lifted the shining, silvery cloth off the floor. It was strange to the touch, like water woven into material. As he picked it up, he realized the cloth formed a cloak of sorts, and when he drew the cloak around his shoulders and looked down at his feet, they were gone!

No way!

He jumped off his bed and dashed to the mirror. Sure enough, his reflection looked back at him, just his head suspended in midair, but his body was completely invisible. He pulled the cloak over his head and his reflection vanished completely.

Awesome!

He could not wait to show Professor Snape!

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

After drinking some hot cocoa and thanking Professor Snape for his gift, Harry started to leave Snape's quarters. At the door, he pulled a small, flat package from the frontispiece of the book and pressed it into the professor's hands. Biting his lip briefly, Harry said, "You've got to enlarge it first. Sorry; it's not much. Happy Christmas, Professor." Then he fled back to his dorm so he could get properly dressed before spending some quality time with his new things, especially the book from the professor, since the man had hinted that he should at least check out the index and chapter one before lessons tomorrow.

When he opened Keating's book, however, he was sidetracked by another discovery: Snape had left two pictures of Harry's Mum tucked into the index. Two pictures of his very own, that he could look at whenever he wanted. Whenever he needed to. He felt that odd, clogged-throat sensation again, and had to swallow hard a few times to make it go away. Meanwhile, in one of the photographs, Lily sat on a bench below a hawthorn tree, and watched him with her bright green eyes, waving to him with a somewhat wistful smile.

Harry, the Hufflepuff and all the Weasleys -- except the one who was a Prefect -- spent a happy afternoon having a furious snowball fight on the grounds. Then, cold, wet, and gasping for breath, they returned to the Great Hall and sat near the large hearth with its warm, crackling fire, where Harry broke in his new chess set by losing spectacularly to Ron.

The worst part of the match, though, was when Professor Snape had come up behind Harry while they were playing, and then Snape and Ron had exchanged barbs, with Gryffindor losing a bunch of points as a result. Harry had been mortified by the whole thing, and after Ron had stomped off, he stared at the chessboard for another few minutes, letting the silence of the Great Hall wash over him. He rubbed his hands over his face and sighed again.

Thanks a lot, Snape, he thought.

But that wasn't really fair. Harry himself, at the start of the confrontation between the two, had been astounded that Snape would take up Harry's side against Weasley's taunting. Maybe the professor had wanted to be . . . kind? No, not kind, but . . . loyal? Perhaps, and maybe Snape didn't know quite how to go about it without raising the other person's ire. Of course, Ron's ire was pretty easily raised by all accounts. Even George and Fred Weasley had said so, during the snowball fight earlier. They'd insisted that Harry and Ron be on the same team, so Ron wouldn't accuse Harry of cheating or anything and they could build a sense of camaraderie. The twins seemed to think it would be good for both boys if they were friends.

Too bad they couldn't have come to Ron's rescue in here.

After another few minutes, Harry put his chess pieces away and set off for the Slytherin dorms. Maybe Snape could teach him how to play wizard's chess better, so he could play against Ron without having to listen to insults at the same time.

And maybe pigs would fly over Hagrid's hut on the next full moon.

HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP

Despite the scene in the Great Hall, it had been Harry's best Christmas day ever. Yet something had been nagging at the back of his mind all day. Not until he climbed into bed was he free to think about it: the invisibility cloak and whoever had sent it.

Harry leaned over the side of his own bed and pulled the cloak out from under it. His father's, the note had said . . . this had been his father's. James Potter had probably worn it, right here in this school! He let the material flow over his hands, smoother than silk, light as air. Use it well, the note had instructed him. But who had sent this cloak? And why give it to him now? Why not when he had first arrived at Hogwarts? Or years ago, after his father had died? He would have loved to have something of his father's during the last ten years, something to remind him that once upon a time, he had been someone's son.

Remembering that morning, Harry recalled the odd look he'd caught in Snape's eyes when the professor had seen him wearing the cloak. Obviously, Snape had seen it before, probably in James Potter's possession, and those memories were not fond ones. Maybe Harry's father had used the cloak to play pranks on Snape. That would make sense, given Snape's instructions to not be foolish with it.

Harry slipped out of bed and wrapped the cloak around himself. Looking down at his legs, he saw only moonlight and shadows. It was a very funny feeling.

Use it well.

He wished he could go exploring now, just put on the cloak and go around Hogwarts without worrying about anyone seeing him or getting in his way. Without anyone ambushing him in the halls. If only Snape didn't have the dorms alarmed to tell him if Slytherins went out after curfew, Harry could do so right now. He could --

"I was wondering when he would give that cloak to you, Harry Potter."

Harry shot several feet into the air and spun around to see the Bloody Baron floating beside the door to the lavatory. "Merlin! I didn't see you!"

The ghost inclined his head a smidgen. "I know."

Harry huffed a laugh despite himself, then said, "Do you know, then? Who sent this to me, I mean?"

"I do."

"Well?"

"Well . . ."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Well, who sent it?"

"The man your father gave it to before he was murdered."

Harry frowned. The Bloody Baron could sometimes be bloody annoying, but he wasn't usually so blatantly obtuse. "Is it a secret? Or are you unable to tell me?"

A pleased look entered the ghost's eyes. "Very good, Harry Potter. It is the latter."

With a short nod, Harry ran through the various suspects, and came up with a very short list. "If I guess the name, can you tell me if I guess right?"

Another glimmer of pride, and Harry could not help but stand straighter under the ghost's regard. "Yes."

"It was Dumbledore, right?"

The Baron inclined his head minutely.

"But, why wouldn't the Headmaster want me to know he sent it?" Harry bundled up the cloak and tucked it into his trunk so he wouldn't be tempted to leave the dorms, even when he knew Snape would be

angry if he did it. Tucking the slippery material under his spare socks, so it wouldn't be seen easily by anyone who happened to open his trunk, Harry peered over his shoulder at the ghost, who had moved farther into the room and was inspecting his box of frogs, which was already almost half empty. "Or is it that he didn't want me to know that my father left it with him?"

"The latter," the ghost said again.

"Weird," Harry muttered, and wondered why Dumbledore might want to keep such a secret. For just a moment, he had the odd thought that Dumbledore would rather have kept the cloak and not given it up, but then had been required to, by someone . . . or something. An oath, perhaps? He shook his head, pushing thoughts like that aside. No matter what life the Headmaster may have condemned Harry to with the Dursleys, he did not strike Harry as a common thief, to steal from the dead. Frowning still, Harry sat on his bed again, pulling the book by Keating into his lap. "What do you think he meant by, 'Use it well'? He told me to use the cloak well, in the note he left with it."

"I cannot answer that question for you," the Bloody Baron said in an oddly strained voice. "He wishes you to discover that for yourself as well."

"Yeah, and get myself strung up by the toes by my Head of House." Harry shivered and leaned back against his pillows. "No, thanks."

The Bloody Baron floated to the bedside and looked at the book in Harry's hands. "A gift from Severus Snape?"

Unable to hold in a grin, Harry nodded. "Yeah. For Christmas. We have our first Occlumency lesson tomorrow. I figured to read the first chapter tonight; he said it would help."

"I am sure it will."

"Do you know anything about Occlumency?"

The ghost looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head slowly. "Not through personal experience."

"But you know people who've learned it?" Harry pushed.

"Besides your Professor Snape?" the Baron asked with a raised brow.

"Well, yeah." Harry turned to the table of contents and read through it again, then opened to the introduction and started reading.

It had been quiet for long enough that Harry had nearly forgotten that the Bloody Baron was in his room, never mind that he had asked a question. Thus, he was surprised enough to startle when the ghost said, in a low, weighty tone, "I do, child. Both Albus Dumbledore and Tom Riddle learned the magic necessary to protect their minds against intrusion, but more importantly, they both mastered the magic that allows them to enter others' minds, to prey upon your mind, to seek the truth in your thoughts and to mine your memories for information."

As he spoke, the ghost had floated closer to Harry's bed, and then straight into it, so his glowing body was actually split by the bed. A shimmering mist surrounded the Baron, and in the suddenly freezing air, hoarfrost rippled out from the ghost's translucent to form feathery patterns across the bedclothes. Crystals of ice sparkled in the cloth. The Baron's haunted silver eyes were mere inches away from Harry's now, and were so filled with torment and horror that Harry's heart lurched in his chest.

"T-tom Riddle?" Harry whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the Baron's terrible gaze, unable, almost, to breathe. His throat stung with cold, and goose bumps had risen on his arms. Shivering hard, he hugged his arms around his middle.

The ghost's mouth was so close, Harry could have counted his teeth, and he would swear he could feel the Baron's frigid breath on his cheeks as the ghost intoned, "Tom Riddle is one of the greatest wizards of all time, Harry Potter, and one of the most terrible. A Slytherin of great cunning and cruelty, and even greater ambition. He would cheat death, if he could, and destroy any who got in his way."

"Voldemort," Harry guessed, knowing he was right.

The ghost's eyes bored into him. "You must guard your mind against him, and against the dreams he awakens inside you. You must."

Harry clutched the book on Occlumency to his chest and forced himself to draw a lungful of painfully freezing air. "I will. I swear."

A bright flash of light made Harry squeeze his eyes shut, and when he opened them a moment later, the Bloody Baron was gone. Usually the Baron floated away, through a door or wall, although every once in a while, he would do a slow fade into nothingness. Harry had never before seen him disappear instantly like that. Even worse, though, was the realization that the Baron was obviously nervous about something, perhaps even afraid of Voldemort . . . or rather, Tom Riddle. Considering Voldemort had murdered at least two people -- and probably lots more, to hear Draco's occasional stories -- he was obviously dangerous and probably a psychopath. But that did not explain why a ghost would fear him.

With trembling hands, Harry opened his book again and studied intensely for several hours before falling asleep.

TBC . . .

2nd A/N: I am so sorry it was so long between chapters. Three months? What is that? Sheesh. But my thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! Thanks, too, for those who have wished me well for my health. I'd like to be doing better than I am, but all good things in time, I suppose.

The next couple chapters will cover the first Occlumency lesson, plus the discovery of a particular mirror.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 42

By jharad17

Disclaimer: None of this is mine!

Warnings: language

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Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

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A bright flash of light made Harry squeeze his eyes shut, and when he opened them a moment later, the Bloody Baron was gone.

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An explosive BOOM rocked Severus' chambers, but before he had a chance to rise from his chair and investigate, the concurrent flash of light nearly blinded him. He blinked hard once, then once more. When he could see again, the Bloody Baron was hovering directly in front of him, silver blood pouring from his chest, and looking nervous . . . which, for anyone else, was the equivalent of panicked.

"What is going on here?" Severus demanded, drawing himself up and tightening the belt on his dressing gown as if it were armor. Never let it be said he lost his composure in a crisis.

"I have just left Harry Potter," the ghost intoned, as if that were enough of an answer. In a way, it was.

Severus gave his end table a significant look, where a vase of dried flowers and a wine glass had both fallen over due to the ghost's concussive entrance. "You left his room intact, I imagine."

"I would have to check to make certain. . . ." Severus was half way to the door, before the ghost finished with, "But I have no reason to believe otherwise."

"Despite the manner of your arrival in my chambers."

"Indeed." The ghost was gradually becoming less . . . frazzled. He peered at the side table then gave Severus an apologetic look.

Severus waved him off, then used his wand to banish the mess and turned back to his chair. "Tell me what happened."

"Harry Potter made a Wizard's Oath."

In the process of sitting back down by the fire, Severus froze. "He what?" His question came out strangled. How could the boy have done something so stupid? And since dinner? Fists clenched, he strode to the door, ready to wrangle a moment's peace from The Boy Who Would Not Leave Bloody Well Alone if he had to put him in a Body Bind to do it.

"He did not realize, I believe, what the result of his oath would be."

Severus grabbed the latch and sneered over his shoulder. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Of course not." The Baron glided closer. Oddly, as the apparition approached, he seemed to bring with him an unnatural chill. Severus could see his breaths, and he repressed a shiver. "He swore only to study Occlumency as hard as he can. To learn it, in order to protect his mind against the heir of Slytherin."

Giving the Baron a sharper look, Severus let go of the door. "What, exactly, did he pledge his magic against?"

"He pledged to guard his mind and dreams from the Dark Lord."

With a small sigh, Severus crossed his arms. He traced his lower lip with an index finger, considering the ramifications. "Perhaps that will not harm him overmuch."

"I surmised that, as well." The Baron's gaze was still intense. "What concerned me more was the amount of power he brought to bear in making his oath."

Severus swallowed hard, and almost did not ask. "How much?"

The Bloody Baron sighed softly, a forlorn sound. "I have not seen such raw power in over one hundred years. And in one so young, when the boy has not yet reached his full potential . . . I have never felt its like before."

As if his heart were being crushed by a giant fist, Severus' chest flooded with pain. He could not breathe, could not think. His vision grayed at the edges. Then, an instant later, the fist opened and he sucked in a harsh breath, greedy for air. He dropped his head down low, braced his hands on his knees, and fought for sanity. Dear Merlin . . .

"Are you well, Severus Snape?" The words were faint, as if they had come from far away and under water, yet Severus still managed to think, Stupid question.

It was another minute before he gathered himself enough to say, "You are certain?" He cocked his head to the side, to see the ghost's expression, and what he saw there made his heart sink further into his stomach. Of course the he was sure. The Baron had known Salazar Slytherin himself. All of the Founders, in fact. He had known Dumbledore, when Albus had come through the school a hundred years ago--

Ah, it was Dumbledore's power the ghost had felt before. Of course.

The Baron had been exposed to the magic of tens of thousands of students, over the course of a thousand years since the Founding of Hogwarts. He had known the magic of the Founders, of Albus Dumbledore, of Tom Riddle, and now, of Harry Potter, who was fated, perhaps, to end Riddle's reign of terror. If he had the power . . .

It was not for another minute or two that the Baron's tidings had truly penetrated, enough that Severus could make some sense of it. Somehow, somehow, he had fallen to his knees. His forehead was lying on his forearms, which rested on the door. His first coherent thought was, "Oh, Harry." Poor, damned boy.

"You must protect him," the Baron said softly.

"I know."

"He is already aware that the Headmaster has designs on him."

Severus nodded tiredly. It was inevitable, really.

"You must aid him--"

"I know! He can't . . ." He exhaled sharply. "His power will be very tempting." The Dark Lord could never learn how much power the boy had, else he would try and take it for his own, one way or the other. Either by enslaving the boy or leeching the magic from his core. Either way, killing Harry would be kinder.

The Baron went on, "Even untried, unrealized, the intensity of his power, even the potential . . . it is enticing now."

Severus could only nod again. He would protect the boy, as he had pledged to do. If that protection must also be from those who would exploit Potter and his magic, so be it. But perhaps even more important now, he would also need to protect the boy from himself, from his own undisciplined mind. Harry would have to learn control and discipline very soon, more so than any other child his age . . . or any age.

Because they were less able to master their emotions, young wizards tended to have a more difficult time mastering their magic. As they matured, they learned control, and their magic responded accordingly. From what Severus had seen, because of the way he was treated by his relatives, Harry had already learned some restraint over his emotions. To not have that self-control in his world had meant punishment or banishment to that damnable cupboard. Yet the boy

still had a temper, and with all that power at his fingertips, he could do terrible things, all unknowing. And so. In addition to Occlumency, they would need to work on other types of meditation that would help the boy govern his emotions, his reactions, and his power. Else, he could do some serious damage to himself and the school. Not to mention, without truly knowing what he was capable of, how could he ever fulfill the bloody prophecy?

"I see you understand, Professor Snape."

"I do." He rose and went to his high board and poured out two fingers of single malt whisky. After this conversation, he deserved it.

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The first Occlumency lesson started off tolerably well. Severus had scheduled them to begin directly after dinner, so Potter could have as much time preparing for the lesson as possible. Well, that was what he told himself, anyway, when he knew, deep down, that the real reason was so the boy could enjoy his free day . . . and so Severus could wrap his mind around the information the Bloody Baron had given him the night before.

Currently, Potter sat on a chair he had occupied a number of times before in Severus' office. The book by Keating was in his lap. He was biting his lip and looking nervous, and it was all Severus could do not to yank that lip out from between the boy's teeth. Really! Could he be more blatant!

Instead, he said, "How much did you manage to read after indulging in holiday sweets and idleness all day?"

The boy swallowed, gripped the book a bit tighter, and said, "I only got to really study the first half. I read the whole thing, though."

"Did you," Severus said, maintaining his blank expression, though he was secretly pleased. He had no real cause to think Potter was a slacker in his studies -- he had shown no such tendency in any of his classes -- yet he could not quash his immediate assumption that all children, when given the chance to loll about idly, would do so.

"Yes, sir."

"We shall see."

He proceeded to question the boy on various theories and stratagems Keating had presented in the first half of his book, especially on the matter of hiding thoughts as opposed to layering thoughts. Potter was able to answer intelligently, if more hesitantly than Severus might have liked. In addition to learning self-control to master his power, Potter obviously needed to acquire a greater measure of self-confidence. Without it, he was far more susceptible to the influence of flatterers and those who doled out praise, or the promise of it. As Severus knew too well, wizards who used such weapons to prey on the desperate-to-belong and the weak-minded, could draw an unloved, uncertain child like Harry into the fold of Dark Magic very quickly. With his level of power, that was untenable.

The other issue that concerned Severus, was that the boy did not seem to associate what he was currently learning about protecting his mind with the spontaneous episode of Occlumency he had demonstrated the first time Severus had dug around in his mind looking for memories. The night he had discovered the boy was a Parselmouth. At the time, he had merely assumed the boy had an innate talent for Occlumency. But now, some very unsettling possibilities were rearing their ugly heads, and he needed time to think hard on what he was postulating, before he went mad. The facts were hard to counter: Harry Potter, with more raw magic inside him than any two wizards since the time of Hogwarts' founding, also possessed talent in Occlumency and was a Parselmouth, two talents the Dark Lord was known for, the very Dark Lord who had vanished on the night Harry Potter's parents had been killed, when the babe himself had merely gained a curse scar.

Very troubling possibilities, indeed.

In the short term, of course, what it meant was that Severus needed to keep a close eye on the Boy Who Couldn't Just Be Normal for Once, which he was already doing for a variety of reasons. What was one more?

In the long term . . . Who could say?

After an hour of questioning the boy, Severus was satisfied that he at least grasped the main concepts of Occlumency. He was a bit dodgy on minutiae, but that was what having a mentor was for. Severus had a number of drills in mind for specific aspects of Occlumency, once the boy had the general idea.

"Very well," he said at last. "Take out your wand."

Potter nodded and pulled the length of holly from his back pocket. Severus managed to keep from shaking his head in chagrin, but determined he would get the boy a proper sheath for his arm, and soon.

"Wand up! I am about to use Legilimency, which you will attempt to block with Occlumency. The first time I used this spell on you, I requested that you not fight me, do you recall?"

With a frown, the boy nodded. "Yes, sir."

"This time, I want to you to fight. As Keating suggested for beginners, you should try to merely expel me from your mind. Do not worry about doing any fancy layering or creating false memories. Just try to get me to leave. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Though Severus very much doubted that was the case, except in theory, he inclined his head and held the boy's gaze. "Very well. Legilimens!"

Once he had immersed himself in the boy's mind, images flew past his inner eye immediately, first one of a pile of presents on the end of a bed and Harry's surprise, followed quickly by joy, when he saw they were addressed to him, then a sketchpad and small bottle of ink, Harry drawing the picture that had eventually been given to Severus as a gift, and then, oddly, a dark space Severus recognized as the cupboard where Harry had spent much of his childhood, and he

grasped on to that one, knowing Harry would try to expel him from it out of embarrassment. In the darkness, Harry was young, maybe only seven or eight years old, and was kneeling on a narrow cot. With a stub of pencil in his hand, he was shading in a sketch on one of the walls, a picture of a motorcycle flying over clouds, with someone -- a rather large someone -- sitting astride it. From this angle, Severus could see that the interior walls of the cupboard were covered with drawings, some obviously infantile efforts, and others with remarkable detail.

As expected, Harry was pushing hard to get Severus out of his mind, out of this memory, and Severus felt the natural talent for this skill in Potter's efforts. Though he could have stayed in the memory, Severus let go this time, but as he was moving through other dark spaces, something else caught his attention and he homed in on it. Unlike the others he had moved through, this memory wasn't dark . . . or not of a dark place, he amended, but was protected by a wall of dark stone, which was what had made him look twice. He felt Harry scrabbling madly at his presence, pulling and pushing at him to pass this by, which only increased his desire to see. What did the boy want to protect so badly?

Buoying his own defenses against the boy's amplified railing by erecting a false show of leaving -- lessening the pressure of his presence, as if he had given up -- Severus sneaked past the dark stone wall when Harry's attention was momentarily distracted. He was startled to find himself in the girls' bathroom on the first floor of Hogwarts.

Troll, he recalled. Potter and his fellow Firsties had fought a troll in that bathroom, and lived to tell the tale, and here the three of them were, slamming through the door to find the frizzy haired Gryffindor huddled beneath the sinks. The twelve foot tall, gray-skinned, lumpy troll loomed over them.

Potter finally realized that Severus had gotten past his defenses and started fighting back. In the memory, Miss Bullstrode darted to the sinks to coax the courageous Gryffindor out from hiding, and Severus wondered what about this encounter the boy felt it necessary to hide. He'd already told Severus what happened, and been given an essay

as punishment, too . . . unless he had lied? With the strength of twenty years of Legilimency practice under his belt, Severus held on against Potter's increasingly frantic attempts to remove him, intent on seeing this memory in its entirety.

Just as in the tale he had been told, Mr. Nott hurled a length of broken pipe at the troll, thus drawing its attention away from the girls, and then Potter was yelling at it . . . No. He was chanting something specific, his wand aimed at the huge beast's chest. It looked like he'd said, Impedimenta. But that couldn't be right; the Impediment Curse was generally learned in Fourth Year Defense.

Before Severus could consider it further, the troll staggered one step over, nearer the sinks, and Potter shouted something else. This time, a bright red bolt of light flashed out of his wand and hit the troll hard. The beast toppled backwards into the position he had been lying in when Severus came upon the scene moments later. That was definitely a Stupefying Charm. Flitwick did not teach that charm until Fifth Year, at least.

Satisfied with what he had learned, Severus exited Potter's mind. The boy was almost prostrate on the floor, gasping for breath, and glaring up at Severus at the same time. When Severus arched an eyebrow, however, Potter swallowed hard and blanked his face, but, to his credit, he did not look away.

Crossing his arms over his chest, with his best I am very disappointed look, Severus sighed. "Explain."

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! And you'all who've been taking time out to say nice things like, "Sorry you're feeling yucky; we'll give you an extra day or two before sending the New Chappie Police 'round to your house . . ." An extra special double latte thanks to you. Heh.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 43

By jharad17

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

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Crossing his arms over his chest, with his best I am very disappointed look, Severus sighed. "Explain."

"I can't," Harry said. He struggled to his feet, not wanting to have to crane his neck to see his professor. It was bad enough he had to look up at him at all, when he was looming like that, and looking so bloody disappointed. Harry felt sick.

"Excuse me?"

"I . . . I don't know why that happened."

Snape glowered some more.

Suddenly annoyed, since the whole mess was the bloody Bloody Baron's doing anyway, Harry scowled right back. "Honest! I don't know why I could suddenly do that spell. The Bloody Baron said it was because of us sharing my body for a little bit, like fantastic memory or something."

"Phantasmal Memory?"

"Yeah. Er, I mean, yes, sir. That's what he said." Harry rubbed his forehead; his scar ached from Snape messing about in his head. He looked up at the professor. "How come I couldn't get you out that time, like I could the first time you looked at my memories?"

Snape sneered, looking oh so cool and collected, when Harry was covered in sweat. "Because I was ready for you to try and push me out. Last time I Legilimized you, I underestimated your abilities. I did not make the same mistake twice."

"You mean, like I did," Harry said, figuring he should have known the professor would be better able to hold on inside his mind this time. Yet he hadn't worked harder to push him out till Snape had started watching the hidden memory of the troll fight.

"Indeed." Snape gestured at the chair in front of his desk, and Harry sank into it gratefully. "Why did you not tell me about the Phantasmal Memory effect, when you fought that troll? One might think you didn't want me to know."

Harry flushed. He had lied to Snape after the fight; he knew it, and knew he had no excuse. But he'd been weirded out by the whole scene, to be honest, and had not wanted the professor to ask more questions about him being possessed by the Bloody Baron, when he didn't really remember it very well. Not to mention, he'd like to put that whole possession incident behind him: the cold sensation, the headaches, and the odd recollection of spells his body knew, but his memory didn't.

"Look at me, Potter."

With a guilty flinch, Harry met the man's gaze. He hated being called 'Potter,' and he knew the professor only did it when he was being extra strict outside of class. But that name -- and the tone which accompanied it -- reminded him too much of the way the Dursleys had treated him. Yet he knew he owed Snape the truth. "I didn't want you to know," he said in a low voice.

"That much is obvious."

Coloring a bit more, Harry nodded. "My body remembers doing those spells, when we fought, when the Baron and I fought Pro--" He cut himself off. "Whoever-it-was we fought my first week here."

"You were going to say Professor Quirrell."

Harry shrugged, looked away.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because it doesn't matter, does it? It's not like anyone's doing anything to keep him from trying again, or to keep Him out of my dreams or--"

Snape stepped toward him, his eyebrows drawn down low. "The Dark Lord is still invading your dreams?"

Harry nodded, still refusing to look at Snape.

Snape blew out a breath, sounding annoyed. "Why did you not tell me?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters, Potter, because if I know, then I can help you keep him out. And it matters because if you do not keep him out, he will know everything that is in your mind." He paused dramatically. "Everything."

And, of course, Harry's mind went immediately to the whatever-it-was that was being guarded by a three headed cerberus, that he knew Voldemort wanted to get his hands on. Harry bit his lip and stared at his hands. "He already knows about what Fluffy's guarding, doesn't he?"

"I imagine so." Snape loomed closer, and Harry did his best not to flinch back, and thought he might have been successful, until Snape crossed his arms over his chest and swayed back on his feet. "But if he knows you know about it, he might attempt to make you help him get it."

"He could do that?" Harry asked, aghast at the very idea.

Snape lifted one eyebrow. "You do recall being in the possession of the Bloody Baron, do you not?"

Harry nodded, and then, "Oh."

"Yes. 'Oh' pretty much covers it."

"How do I keep him out then?"

With the tiniest lift to the corner of his lip, Snape said, "I will teach you. But you must do your utmost to learn everything I show you. It is very important you keep the Dark Lord out of your thoughts and your dreams. These next few weeks, we will focus your Occlumency training on forming a barrier for your dreaming mind. You'll need to lie down for this, I'm afraid."

Wrinkling his nose at the state of Snape's office floor, Harry just sighed and stood, pushing back his chair. With a quick hand on his shoulder, Snape stopped him from lying down, and instead, waved his wand in two smooth movements, conjuring a low cot, complete with pillow and blanket.

"Brilliant!"

"Indeed." Snape jutted his chin at the cot. "Go on and lie down; it won't bite." Grinning, Harry laid down on the cot, and when he was comfortable, Snape continued to instruct him. "Close your eyes and listen to the sound of my voice. Listen only to my voice; nothing else can penetrate your consciousness. Clear your mind of all things, and hear only my voice. Hear each word as I say it, and understand all that I say. Your mind is a blank slate, a field of white, and I will write upon it all I want you to hear, and to know. . . ."

Snape continued speaking, using a low, soothing tone he usually reserved for calming Harry from his nightmares, as far as Harry could tell. But this was nice, being able to listen without being caught up in images and scenes -- like his nightmares -- that scared the bejeezus out of him. He rarely told Snape what his bad dreams were about, feeling they were far too personal to share, but Snape came and

soothed him back to sleep anyway, and had done so, ever since that time he'd found Harry in the washroom with Gaius Avery.

With a jolt, Harry realized he was not keeping a white, clear field, but was starting to think about bad things he never wanted to think about. Hoping Snape had not caught him faltering, Harry cut off his thoughts. He listened to the professor's cool, relaxing tones again and forced himself to obey each of Snape's commands: tense or relax this or that muscle; clear this or that thought.

They went through several more exercises, but Snape did not try to access his mind again. Eventually, the lesson was over, and Harry was allowed to get up from the cot.

"Return tomorrow evening at the same time, Mr. Potter," Snape instructed. "Tonight, at bedtime, I want you to practice the exercise I just put you through. Can you do that?"

Harry nodded, recalling the specific orders. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Let me know tomorrow if you had any problems getting to sleep."

He didn't have to say he would know if Harry suffered any nightmares; they both already knew that he probably would, and if he did, Snape would know, and he would be there to help Harry through it.

If Harry wasn't so embarrassed about the situation, he would have been inclined to feel very fondly of Snape for being there for him when he was afraid in the middle of the night, when no one else had ever been, at least not in his memory.

"I will, sir. Thank you."

"Have you finished your essays yet?"

Harry gave him an incredulous look. "For when schools starts again? That's almost two whole weeks away!"

"I am aware of the school calendar, Mr. Potter. But I take it you have not yet begun your holiday work."

"Um, no, sir. Not yet." It was on the tip of his tongue to remind Snape that he'd been reading the book on Occlumency like mad, and hadn't had extra time for regular school work, but Snape already knew that, and the only thing a reminder would do is make the professor more snappish. "I'll start my essays tomorrow," he promised instead.

"Good." Snape nodded. "You are dismissed."

"Thank you, sir." Harry hesitated before leaving, however, biting his lip.

Snape had gone back around his desk and sat in his chair where he shuffled some papers for what appeared to be a grading session. He peered over at Harry from under his heavy brows. "Is there something else?"

"I, er, well . . . well . . ."

"Deep subject?"

Harry cracked a smile. "Er, no, sir, but I thought, well, maybe if you weren't too busy . . . er, we could, um . . ."

"Spit it out, Harry, I haven't all day."

The use of his first name relaxed him, as he supposed Snape knew it would, and he smiled a bit more. "I thought, we haven't looked at pictures for a while . . ."

"And you would like to, this evening? Don't you have some chess matches to--" Snape cut himself off, and actually seemed to blush, even as Harry himself colored with embarrassment.

"Um, I don't really know how to play, sir," he said quietly.

Staring at his desk top, Snape nodded slowly, then lifted his head till his gaze met Harry's. "Harry, I . . . I apologize, for bringing that up. It was needlessly cruel."

Harry shrugged. They were past lessons, now, and into more casual waters, but he was still nervous around the professor, for reasons he couldn't really describe, and had more to do with memories of his uncle and aunt's treatment of him -- despite being their nephew -- than anything else. "It's okay."

"It isn't," Snape said. "But it is kind of you to say so." He rose abruptly. "Come with me."

Harry followed the professor into his private rooms, where he had been just yesterday, and given him the picture he'd drawn. In a quick glance around, he couldn't see the drawing out anywhere obvious; maybe Snape had thrown it away. Harry wouldn't have blamed him.

"I want to show you something," the professor was saying, and waved at the brown sofa where Harry had sat yesterday morning. "Have a seat."

"Thank you, sir."

Snape made a non-committal noise and disappeared through another door for a minute, and when he returned, he had a drawing in his hand of about the same size as the one Harry had done, but this one was in pencil. Snape sat next to him on the sofa and held the picture so they could both look at it. Sure enough, this was a sketch of Snape, but much younger, Harry thought, looking at him. Whoever had done it had done a great job with shading and proportion, he thought.

"It's good," Harry said, wondering why they were looking at it. A sudden thought occurred to him. "I can take mine back, if you don't need it," he said quickly. "I didn't know you had one already."

Snape gave him a puzzled look, as if he had no idea what Harry meant, and then something seemed to click and he shook his head, hard enough to send the greasy strands of his hair whipping about his face. "No! I want the one you drew, too, Harry." His lips twisted in a

smirking smile. "You drew me very well. I have it on the desk in my study."

"Oh!" Snape's words warmed something inside him, but Harry still didn't understand. "Then why . . ."

"Am I showing you this picture?" At Harry's nod, Snape actually smiled, for like the second time ever. "Your mother drew this one for me."

Harry's "Oh," this time was not much more than a soft expulsion of breath.

"Lily enjoyed drawing, too, Harry. I believe we were about ten years old when she did this one, and I've kept it all these years."

Harry was staring at the drawing, memorizing the lines and shading and the shape of the professor's eyes, the cant of his head . . . everything about the drawing that he could. His Mum had done this. She'd touched this paper, and brought the face of her friend to life, in pencil. She liked the same things he did, and had similar skills, too. It was nothing short of amazing.

"I thought you might like seeing this."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

They talked together a bit longer, about other sketches Harry's Mum had done, and the mediums she'd used as she got older, and then it was nearly curfew and time for Harry to go back to the dorm. For some reason, he didn't want to leave, however, and he had to force himself to stand and put his trainers back on. When he realized he was dragging his heels, he almost laughed at himself. Stupid Harry, do you think you're his real family, that you get to stay with him like you're his son? He hurried to the door, then.

Snape calling his name brought him up short.

"Yes, sir?"

"Would you . . ." The professor hesitated uncharacteristically, then continued, "Would you like for me to teach you wizard chess some time?"

Though he wasn't sure what he'd expected Snape to say, that was not it. Still, it was a kind offer. He smiled. "Yeah, that'd be great, sir."

"Perhaps after your lesson tomorrow."

"Okay. Thank you."

"Good night, Harry."

"Good night, Professor."

Outside in the corridor, the Bloody Baron was waiting to escort him back to his dormitory, as patiently as if he had just arrived. Harry walked, and the Baron floated in silence, and after he reached his room, Harry performed his ablutions, flopped onto his four-poster, and ran through the exercise that he hoped would help keep dreams of Voldemort out of his head.

At least this once, it worked.

--HPSSHPSSHPSS--

The next day was filled with reading and writing essays until mid afternoon when Harry could not take the dull quiet anymore. He grabbed the Invisibility Cloak out of his trunk, flung it over his head and escaped his dormitory to walk in entire anonymity through the halls of Hogwarts.

It was glorious.

The first thing he noted was that even the Bloody Baron could not sense him, not even with Phantasma-whatever, and so, once Harry crept past him, he was really and truly alone in the halls of Hogwarts for the first time in months. The portraits on the first floor didn't notice

him either, and Harry liked that very much. He'd caught them talking about him lately, especially since he was in the company of the Bloody Baron so often, and no one could hear the Baron except him - - and Snape. The portraits all thought he was a bit touched, but now he could glide right past them and they kept quiet.

For the rest of the afternoon, Harry explored Hogwarts, finding staircases he had never seen before, and passageways that took him to rooms that were new to him, too. He had a great time, and almost hated to end his "adventure" and go to dinner. Afterwards, he had another lesson with Snape, and this one was much less difficult to deal with, as Snape kept doing the dream-barrier exercises, and did not enter his mind again.

Over the next week, in fact, Snape only entered his mind a couple of times during lessons, and each time with the express purpose of showing him how to erect specific barriers, which he could do better from within, the professor explained. Afterwards, they played chess for an hour or two, or looked at pictures of Harry's Mum, and once, Harry asked if it would be all right to bring his sketch book and pencils, as he had an idea for a drawing. After giving him a funny look, Snape allowed it, and Harry happily drew the man's office again, although this time with the actual bottles and jars of wriggly, weird-looking potion ingredients, and this time with his Mum in front of a cauldron. He gave the picture to Snape at the end of Christmas break, and Snape appeared so overcome with emotion that Harry had to actually turn away so as to give him some privacy.

During the days, after working on his essays, and studying both his Occlumency book as well as the one on Elemental protection that Teddy had given him before the holidays, Harry continued exploring the castle. He stayed well clear of the room with Fluffy in it -- though he had yet to see the cerberus for himself, and wondered briefly if it were as horrible a beast as everyone said -- but explored the library a bit more fully than he'd been able to before. Under his Invisibility Cloak, after all, he could go into the Restricted Section, and no one would know . . . so long as he didn't try to open a book that screamed.

The most interesting thing he found was on the day after New Year's, when he spied Ron Weasley coming out of a room on the fourth floor,

a few corridors away from the library. Weasley glanced all around before actually stepping out into the hallway, and he eased the door closed behind him, really quietly, as if he didn't want anyone to hear him going.

Odd, Harry thought. Ron had never struck him as the sneaky type. He peered at the door to the room Ron had exited, and wondered what was hidden inside. Two ways to find out, and one of them might lessen the gap between him and the boy he had once thought would be his friend. Thus, after letting the redhead move past him and go a few steps towards the main staircase, Harry removed the Cloak and rolled it up under his arm. He called out, "Hey, Weasley. Find anything interesting in there?"

Weasley levitated about three feet, and spun to face Harry. "What's it to you?"

"Nothin'," Harry replied. He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at the door Ron had exited from. "I've been exploring the castle some, and just wondered what was in that room."

"Nothing."

"Really? You were in there kind of a long time." Harry had no idea at all how long Ron had been in the room, but he made an educated guess, based on not having seen much of the other boy since Christmas.

Weasley's face reddened, almost as bright as his hair. "It's none of your business what I do, Slytherin Sneak!"

Harry held up his hands, thinking of mentioning something about kettles and pots, but refrained. "Sorry, I was just asking. Thought you might like to share adventures."

The other boy's eyes narrowed, as if Harry were taking the piss, but then he shrugged in turn. "I guess. Have you found anything?"

Harry nodded eagerly. "I found a moaning ghost on the second floor called Myrtle, and the door to the kitchens, too." Draco had showed

him that, of course, but he figured, from the way Weasley put away food, he might enjoy a bit of information like that.

As he'd thought, Weasley perked right up, grinning back at him. "Yeah? Where is it?"

"When you're facing the marble staircase in the Entrance Hall, take the right hand stairs, like you're going to the Puffies' common room, and then when you come to a picture of a big bowl of fruit, you tickle the pear and the door opens. The Hogwarts House Elves are really great -- they'll give you all kinds of food." He'd gone to see them a few times this week, in fact -- exploring made him extra hungry -- and they always loaded him down with treats.

"Brilliant!"

Harry grinned. "Yeah." Then he gestured again at the door behind him, and asked hesitantly, "So, what's in there?"

"You'll never believe it," Weasley said. "I'm not sure I do, myself."

"Yeah? Show me."

"All right, come on. It's brilliant, really," he said easily as he led Harry to the door. "I wanted to show someone, actually, but Fred'n George don't give a toss about the future, so they don't even care about what I found."

"What is it?" Harry asked again, getting excited. Something that showed the future? Could he see himself defeating Voldemort?

"It's a big mirror, but it doesn't just show your reflection." They entered the room, a dusty and gloomy affair, which looked like an unused classroom. The dark shapes of desks and chairs were piled against the walls, and there was an upturned wastepaper basket -- but propped against the wall facing the two of them was something that didn't look as if it belonged there, something that looked as if someone had just put it there to keep it out of the way. It was a magnificent mirror, as high as the ceiling, with an ornate gold frame,

standing on two clawed feet. There was an inscription carved around the top: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi.

What the heck? Harry went closer to the mirror, but dared not look into the face, not yet. "It shows you the future?" he asked quietly.

"It must do," Weasley answered. "I saw myself in it, when I looked, but I was Quidditch Captain, and Head Boy, too. I had the House Cup in my hands."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

Drawing up his courage, Harry went to stand in front of the mirror. At once, he gasped and spun around to see behind him, but only Ron was there, still. But in the mirror . . . he slowly turned around to see a whole crowd standing behind him just like before. At least ten others. Harry looked over his shoulder -- but still, no one was there. Or were they all invisible, under cloaks like his? Was he in fact in a room full of invisible people and this mirror's trick was that it reflected them, invisible or not?

"What do you see?" Weasley asked.

"I'm, uh, I'm not sure," Harry said. He looked in the mirror again. A woman standing right behind his reflection was smiling at him and waving. He reached out a hand and felt the air behind him. If she was really there, he'd touch her, their reflections were so close together, but he felt only air -- she and the others existed only in the mirror.

Though she was a bit older than in Snape's photos, there was no mistaking Lily Potter. His mother. She had dark red hair and green eyes just like Harry's. He edged a little closer to the glass, and then he noticed that she was crying; smiling, but crying at the same time, and she knew Harry was there. The tall, thin, black-haired man standing next to her put his arm around her. He wore glasses, and his hair was very untidy. It stuck up at the back, just as Harry's did. His father!

Harry was so close to the mirror now that his nose was nearly touching that of his reflection. "Mum?" he whispered. "Dad?"

They looked at him, smiling. Really looked at him, not just pretend, like in the photos. And slowly, Harry looked into the faces of the other people in the mirror, and saw other pairs of green eyes like his, other noses like his, even a little old man who looked as though he had Harry's knobby knees -- Harry was looking at his whole family, for the first time in his life.

The Potters and maybe some Evanses, too, smiled and waved at Harry, and he stared hungrily back at them, his hands pressed flat against the glass as though he was hoping to fall right through it and reach them. He had a powerful kind of ache inside him, half joy, half terrible sadness.

"What is it, Harry?" Ron asked again, but very softly. Even so, Harry flinched at the unexpected sound. "You said 'Mum and Dad'. You can see them in there, can't you. But aren't they. . . ?"

"Yeah," Harry said, feeling choked. "They're dead."

"So . . ."

"The mirror can't be showing the future, Ron."

"No," Ron agreed after a long moment. "What do you think . . .?"

Harry could not drag his gaze away from his parents, from the rest of his family. He swallowed hard and made himself answer anyway, knowing he had to, knowing that once he left this mirror, he would never return. "Maybe it just shows what you really, really want, more than anything. Even if you can never have it."

A moment later, another person joined the crowd near Harry, and he could never mistake Severus Snape for anyone else. His Mum and Dad greeted Snape, and shook his hand, and as his Mum and Dad both put a hand on Harry's shoulder, the Potions Professor gazed down at him with a smile, then ruffled the hair on his head, and it was so real he almost felt it. It was as if they were all there with him, as if

they were all his family, even Snape, and he felt so warm and sad and happy all at once he thought he might burst.

"Yeah," Ron said, sounding sad. "I guess you're right."

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews!

Some of the descriptions in this chapter are lifted whole cloth from JKR's The Sorcerer's Stone, Chapter 12, "The Mirror of Erised," and neither they nor the setting, nor the characters in this story belong to me. But then, you knew that already, yes? :-D

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 44

By jharad17

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

"Maybe it just shows what you really, really want, more than anything. Even if you can never have it."

A moment later, another person joined the crowd near Harry, and he could never mistake Severus Snape for anyone else. His Mum and Dad greeted Snape, and shook his hand, and as his Mum and Dad both put a hand on Harry's shoulder, the Potions Professor gazed down at him with a smile, then ruffled the hair on his head, and it was so real he almost felt it. It was as if they were all there with him, as if they were all his family, even Snape, and he felt so warm and sad and happy all at once he thought he might burst.

"Yeah," Ron said, sounding sad. "I guess you're right."

--HPSSHPSSHPSS--

Severus Snape spent his Christmas Break that year in a way completely unlike any other year since he began teaching, ten years ago. That is, he socialized. He spent a lively afternoon or two with Minerva, ostensibly going over ways they could improve OWL scores in their subjects, but in fact regaling each other with the best pranks they had seen and been caught by, the past ten years, as well as past students who had gone on to make names for themselves. On several afternoons, he joined Filius Flitwick in a cuppa, to discuss the possibility of forming a Dueling Club. They decided to give it a try next year. Finally, one night he even stayed up late with Dumbledore, discussing matters other than the Worst Dark Wizard Ever, topics such as how they were enjoying the holiday, memories of holidays past, and familial topics.

The last, especially, surprised Severus the most. He had very rarely shared any details of his home life with anyone, even Lily Potter, and

here he was with the man he had once wished would permanently rescue him from his father's temper, both of them drinking tea, with a "little splash of something to warm us," discussing Tobias' fondness for snooker and a dark beer.

Severus had been otherwise unoccupied for the evening, once Occlumency training was done for the evening, because Harry had begged off chess or photographs for the first time since the holidays began. The boy had presumably gone to bed early or put the finishing touches on his work for his classes, which were due to resume on Monday.

That was the other major difference of this holiday: Harry.

Severus had been teaching Occlumency to the Brat Who Wouldn't Let Him Be Alone almost every evening after dinner for the last two weeks, and the oddness of it was, Severus had not minded. Normally, a school holiday was a good chance for Severus to close up shop and retreat to his favorite place -- his quarters and his private lab -- where he would see neither hide nor hair of anyone else for the duration. This year, however . . . The Brat had drawn him out. The two of them had perused photographs of Lily, played chess, both wizarding and Muggle, and discussed magical theory, mostly about Occlumency, but also about Elemental Magic. For some reason, Harry seemed interested in the subject, and it was always a good feeling to have a willing and eager student.

And Harry was not only willing, he was . . . bright and amusing, and he had a charming way about him, especially when he was trying to redirect conversation away from a troublesome topic. Severus was . . . glad, yes glad that he had finally seen past the shortcomings of the boy's heritage to see him as a pupil driven to learn, and with the faculties to do so.

He had noticed, however, an odd melancholy about the boy the last couple days, and had come to Dumbledore tonight to see if the old man -- with his innumerable "insights" into people (Read: means of spying) -- might help him suss out the problem.

Somehow or other, they had come around to speaking of snooker, a game Severus had never cared for, but which Albus apparently did. "It started amongst wizards, your father would be overjoyed to know," Albus said with a snort.

"Overjoyed, yes, I'm sure that's the word," Severus rejoined.

"When the Muggles started playing, of course, the balls were kept on a billiards table, no longer flying about like bludgers, of course."

Severus smiled wryly. "Of course."

Albus chatted for a few more minutes about the game, then added suddenly, "Do you recall seeing the Mirror of Erised?"

"Do I . . ." Severus' eyes narrowed, recalling that magical artifact. He swallowed. "Yes. I thought it lost after . . ."

With a kind smile, Dumbledore shook his head. "No, no, dear boy. It is here again, at Hogwarts. I have been meaning to move it down into the Pit, but have been too slow--"

"Has someone gotten the Stone!?" Severus interrupted.

"No, nothing like that . . . just, I'm afraid the mirror has been discovered in its current location by two of our First Years."

Since there were only two Firsties in the school at present, that meant only one thing. He sucked in a breath. "Potter and the Weasley boy."

"None other. I'm afraid Harry Potter in particular has become quite enamored of what the mirror can show him."

Considering his conversations -- and innumerable hours looking over pictures of his mother -- with the boy, he could guess fairly closely what that was. "Yes, I'm sure."

"I'd like you to take care of it, Severus."

Once upon a time, he had become enamored of the mirror himself, and he understood what Albus was asking. "Of course. Tell me where he is."

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

Watching the boy in the upstairs classroom the next afternoon, Severus eased himself onto the edge of a nearby desk top, a heavy feeling in his chest. Rather than say anything immediately, he observed the boy for some little while, trying to decide how best to approach the issue. Somehow -- probably with that damnable invisibility cloak -- Harry had managed to elude his usual watcher, the Bloody Baron, and thus Severus had thought all this time he was in his dorm, studying, in the afternoons. Severus would need to speak with the Baron, too, and discover why he had not been following his charge.

Towards the front of the dusty room, Harry was crouched in front of the mirror, looking hungrily into its depths. Severus could just imagine what members of his family he saw within. This is probably where he had scampered off to the night before, too, rather than play chess or look at non-interactive pictures of people he would never know personally.

It made Severus ache with sorrow, just to see. Finally, he could take no more of watching. "Harry. Come away from there now."

The boy's head snapped around as if he had seen a boggart. His eyes were very wide, but were ringed with dark circles. Had he been sneaking out at night, too? No . . . none of his alarms had sounded. "Sir? I didn't see you."

"No, I imagine not. Your eyes are all for that mirror."

"I . . . er, yes. Yes, sir." Harry climbed quickly to his feet and darted a guilty look at the artifact, even as he sidled away.

Severus slid off the desk and approached the boy, trying not to scowl. He didn't want to frighten the boy, after all. "So. You've discovered the Mirror of Erised."

"Erised? What's . . ." The boy trailed off and peered at the mirror again, specifically at the runic-style lettering around the frame: Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi. "Erised," he repeated softly, and his face crumpled. "Desire."

"Yes," Severus agreed softly. "You know what the mirror does, I assume."

Harry nodded, looking at the floor. "Shows you what you really, really want but can never have."

The boy's words were like a kick in the stomach. How true they were, and yet . . . "In a way, Harry. As it was explained to me, when I was a boy, the mirror shows us nothing more than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts." He paused and kept from looking at the mirror himself. Nothing good would come of it. As gently as he could, he said, "I imagine you see your family standing around you when you look in."

The boy gave the mirror another guilty look, then turned back to Severus, tears glittering on his lashes, which he hastily blinked away before they fell. Severus could understand, intimately, how he must feel. For his own part, he had seen family, too, when he found the mirror in his fourth year, but they gathered around him in a way which had never happened in true life. His father had clapped him proudly on the back and his mother kissed his brow . . . and then, Lily stood close by his side, their hands clasped tightly together, even when they kissed. . . .

"Yes," Harry breathed.

"I know," Severus said. And he truly did. "But a wise man once told me, this mirror will give neither truth nor knowledge. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."

"Is it possible?" Harry whispered. "Can it happen ever? What I see?"

Wondering what the boy could see in the mirror besides his dead family gathered around him, Severus shook his head. "No, Harry. There is no way to bring back the dead. Not even with magic."

The boy's face fell, and Severus took a step closer to him, not sure what he could do, but feeling like he should try to ease the boy's pain somehow. But all he could say was, "Professor Dumbledore will move the mirror tomorrow, and he asks that you do not try and seek it out again."

"The Headmaster?" Harry looked up at him, green eyes shining. "What does he care?"

"He cares for all the students here," Severus replied, even though he was not completely sure of the truth of the statement, given how shabbily his snakes were often treated, in comparison to his favored Gryffindors. "But more importantly, I care, Harry, and I do not want you to waste your life chasing after dreams. As I was told, when I found the mirror, it does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live."

He waited until the boy nodded slowly and gathered up his cloak before speaking again. "I shall expect you to stay after Occlumency tonight, to discuss this with me some more. But for now, you'd best go and work on your holiday essays, hm?"

Without meeting Severus' eyes, the boy shook his head. "I've finished those, sir."

"Then perhaps you'd like to come and have a game of chess."

The boy gave a tiny shrug, then said, "All right. Thank you, sir."

"Come along, Harry." He gestured to the door and followed the boy out.

Later that evening, as Severus had assumed he would, Harry said, "Sir, may I ask you a question?"

"You just did," he pointed out. "But you may ask another."

Harry gave him a lopsided smile, the first Severus had seen in days. "Can I ask, what do you, er, I mean, what did you see in the mirror?"

Severus graced him with a small smile of his own, even as he looked away and took a long sip of the glass of wine he often enjoyed on winter evenings. He did not want to answer. Nor did he want to lie. In the end, he said, "Can you not guess?" and was gratified when the boy nodded, blushing slightly. Even if Harry could never know the whole truth, he could probably guess a portion of it.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

After the holidays, Severus' schedule was once more filled with preparation for his classes and teaching during the days, then correcting assignments and exams and holding frequent detentions for Gryffindors -- especially Weasleys -- at night. Whenever possible, he squeezed in extra hours with his five Seventh Year NEWT students to prepare them for their upcoming exams. He still met with Harry two nights a week for Occlumency lessons, and once a week or so for chess, but all of their meetings were after Slytherin Quidditch practices, as Marcus had the team out on the pitch almost every evening.

The weather had turned rainy, wet and cold. Fortunately, wizarding children were less likely to take sick than their Muggle counterparts, and thus Madame Pomfrey required no more Pepper-up Potions than usual, even when various Quidditch teams re-entered the castle from practice looking more like drowned kneazles than school children. If not for Filch's determined whinging about the state of the Entry Hall, Severus might have found the sight tremendously amusing . . . bollocks to that; he did find the sight amusing. Not that any of the little brats would ever know; Severus always made sure of his sneer before they saw him.

He noticed, however, during their various meetings, that Harry seemed quieter than he had been before the boy went up against the Mirror of Erised. Occasionally, he appeared embarrassed. Severus brought up the issue once or twice, but Harry refused outright to say what was bothering him, and Severus refused to abuse his trust by discerning the truth during their Occlumency lessons.

Still, they were not as comfortable together as they had been at the beginning of the holidays, and Severus, for one, felt the loss keenly.

He refused to consider why.

A few weeks after Gryffindor beat Hufflepuff in their late-February Quidditch match, Severus insisted on refereeing the upcoming bout between Slytherin and Hufflepuff, over Minerva's objections of favoritism.

"Favoritism!" he shouted, incensed as much as he had ever been before at the insinuation. They stood nose to nose in Dumbledore's office. "This has nothing to do with Slytherin's chances! If you believe you can protect the boy in the air better than I, then do so!"

McGonagall drew herself up. "I'm not much of a flier anymore, Severus. You know that."

"Of course," he agreed. "That's why it is left to me to make sure no one tries to kill him this time."

"I'm sure you're over-reacting--" the elderly professor started.

"I had to chant counter curses for a quarter hour during his last game," he said stiffly, "without pause. You saw what his broom was doing. He was lucky he didn't get bucked off. If I had been in the air, I could have aided him far better."

Minerva glared daggers, arms crossed over her chest. You'd think he was trying to steal the Quidditch Cup from her! It wasn't as if Gryffindor had a chance of it anymore, not without Charlie Weasley. Finally, she gave a sharp nod. "If Pomona agrees, then I'll go along. But I still think Rolanda should be present as well."

"Agreed," Severus said, glad to be done with this argument. He disliked, intensely, needing to raise his voice whilst in Dumbledore's presence. He had done so perhaps a handful of times over the last dozen years. Almost every time, he realized with a start, it was to do with one Potter or another.

"Agreed," McGonagall echoed. She strode out of the office, her head high, likely on her way to make her case against him with Pomona Sprout.

"How are you faring, my boy?"

Severus turned from where he had been watching the Gryffindor head retreat, and faced the Headmaster. "I am well, Albus. Thank you."

The man smiled into his beard. "Good, good. I was . . . concerned, a short while ago, that you were in over your head, with regard to Harry Potter."

"Over my head?"

Dumbledore nodded, gesturing lightly with his left hand. "He is an engaging child, to be sure. I admit as much. But when you were troubled about teaching him Occlumency, when we needed to keep Voldemort from his mind, I thought perhaps you had become too close to him. Too close to do what was needful."

Severus carefully kept the scowl that wanted to surface from his expression. "I do not follow," he said, although he was almost certain he did.

"Harry Potter is not just a student at this school, Severus," Albus said slowly, as if speaking to a rather stupid child. It was a tone he tended to reserve for special occasions, and Severus detested it, and every occasion on which it had been used. "He is also the one prophesied to defeat Voldemort forever."

"He is a child, Albus."

"He is the Boy Who Lived. He will require even more training if he is to survive into adulthood."

"I see."

Dumbledore smiled again. "I am sure you do, my boy. As his Head of House, and one of my most trusted, you will be in charge of much of his training. He will need to be challenged as only you can do."

Severus pursed his lips. "Do recall, Albus, what I requested the last time you pressed me into training the boy. Occlumency is not like Charms. I cannot force talent in the art. In the weeks I have worked with him, I have done little more than help him block his dreaming mind, as he is not ready for more. But if I am to train him further as you wish, I will want full custody of the boy during the summer holidays, as well as unfettered access to him during the school year."

"Agreed. He will be yours."

A surge of feeling rose up in Severus' chest. He could hardly wait to tell the boy that he need not return to his relatives--

"After a minimum of fourteen days in the custody of his aunt and uncle, of course."

Severus stared at the barmy old coot. "I beg your pardon?"

"Harry must return to their home for two weeks each summer, to renew the blood wards against Voldemort and his Death Eaters." Dumbledore's blue eyes twinkled, as if he could hear Severus' heart plummet. "At least while he is a student here, the boy must always have that place of safety to retreat to if necessary. The only place he will be completely safe is at the Dursleys' residence."

"He will be safe from Dark Wizards there."

"Yes, of course."

"But only safe from them. Not from his Muggle relatives."

"Not this again, Severus. A few sharp words in the boy's direction will not kill him. He may not have come to us as well fed and healthy as I might have hoped, but he is alive, and he is cared for--"

"Not as well as they would care for a dog!"

Dumbledore was on his feet, his voice thunderous. "SEVERUS! Harry Potter MUST return to the Dursleys for two weeks each year! You may either accept it as necessary, or you leave me with little choice. I will find someone else I can trust to train him."

Feeling the blood drain from his face, Severus shook his head quickly. "No, no, you're right, Headmaster. It will be as you say. He'll go to them for two weeks." He would just need to be nearby during that time, in case anything more than a few sharp words passed from the Muggles to the boy.

"Excellent. I'm pleased you agree." Dumbledore resumed his seat and gestured in dismissal. "Good luck at Saturday's match, Severus."

"Thank you, Headmaster." Severus nodded on his way out, not so keen on sharing this news with Harry, after all.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! I heart you lots and lots.

This story won an award and scored Runner-Up for another at The Quibbler! Check the site out via my profile. Oh, and "Whelp II" is Runner up for some stuff, too, and I am Runner Up for Best Writer.

It's so exciting, I can hardly write . . . hm. Nah, that's never going to happen. :-D

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 45

By jharad17

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

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"Excellent. I'm pleased you agree." Dumbledore resumed his seat and gestured in dismissal. "Good luck at Saturday's match, Severus."

"Thank you, Headmaster." Severus nodded on his way out, not so keen on sharing this news with Harry, after all.

--HPSSHPSSHPSS--

"I don't get this part," Millie said. Working on their Herbology essays, Harry, Millie and Teddy were clustered around a table in the common room in mid-March, a week before Slytherin's next Quidditch match. "Where it says, 'All carnivorous plants of the Andes will access the most ubiquitous comestibles.' What the hell does that mean?"

"Language, Bulstrode," Teddy scolded.

"Shut it, Nott," replied Millie.

"It means they'll eat whatever's most plentiful around them," said Harry.

Teddy's eyes widened. "Someone's been reading the thesaurus."

Harry smiled. "No. Our Head taught me those."

"Snape?" Millie frowned. "He taught you?"

"Come on, Mills, you know he's been tutoring me on stuff."

"Secret stuff, you said. I didn't figure you meant vocabulary."

"Well, no," Harry admitted. His grip on his quill tightened. "But like he told me over the Christmas holiday, 'Your vocabulary is deplorable, Mr. Potter,'" he said in his best Snape imitation. It must have been a good one, he reckoned, as several other studying Slytherins lifted their heads quickly from their books and swiveled to look at him, each one followed by a scowl and re-lowering of the head.

Teddy laughed easily as Harry ducked his head in embarrassment. "You have spent too much time with him. Told you so, Mills."

"Did not," Millie answered with a smirk.

"I don't know about too much," said Harry.

"As often as you're with us."

Harry nodded with a small sigh and bent over his work again. He couldn't deny the truth. Every night, just about, Flint had the team out on the pitch practicing, no matter what the weather. They came in most nights wet and bedraggled, trailing mud and whatnot all over the Entrance Hall, but Harry would never give up flying, or Quidditch. He couldn't possibly. And on nights when he wasn't practicing with the team, he was usually with Professor Snape, either learning Occlumency or, one night a week, looking at pictures or playing chess.

Aside from being Seeker and flying around on his new broom, Harry liked those evenings best. He'd seen all the pictures of his Mum that Snape had now, and even had his favorites -- besides the two the professor had given him for Christmas. Occasionally, Snape would talk about Harry's Mum, too, telling him stories from when they were in school, or earlier, when they played together as children. A bit less often, they talked about how Harry was getting on in school, and Harry knew, deep down, that Snape wanted him to talk about the Dursleys, too, and how he had been treated at their house. He really

liked talking with the professor, but when he felt like Snape was fishing for something, he shut down, more often than not. It was a long ago learned habit of survival.

He also got the sense from Snape -- and the Bloody Baron, too -- that there was something they weren't telling him. Something about his power. The Baron had never mentioned the blinding light that had sent him out of Harry's presence when he made an oath to learn how to keep Voldemort out of his mind. And Snape never really talked about Voldemort at all, except to make sure Harry had not had any more visions from him. (Thankfully, he had not. He still, occasionally, had nightmares about the poor unicorns.) But every so often, he caught one or the other of them staring at him speculatively, as if they were measuring him. He didn't like it, nor where his thoughts tended to stray when they did so. What was his connection to Voldemort? Was it more than just his curse scar? He didn't feel like he could ask, as if he'd be breaking some sort of balance he had now with his tutor.

Harry also had not spoken about what he had seen in the mirror to anyone but Ron Weasley, on the few occasions when the two ran into each other. They didn't fight anymore, and Ron didn't call him horrible names, which was good. And his twin brothers, Fred and George, had taken an odd sort of liking to Harry, he thought, clapping him on the back all the time, and offering him sweets. Harry never accepted them -- his sense of self-preservation was too well-ingrained -- but he thought the gesture was nice.

But with Snape . . . he liked spending time with the professor, more than just for the pictures and glimpses into his Mum's life, but also because Snape treated him like a real person, which few adults had ever done. Snape helped him, too, like with his nightmares, and he was always there to listen afterwards or anytime, really, if Harry wanted to talk. And with the Occlumency training, with a lot of hard mental work and meditation, Harry had been able to cut way down on the frequency and intensity of those nightmares. He had never felt so close to an adult before, never trusted one like he trusted Snape now. But he could never let the professor know what he had seen in the mirror. After all, Snape, himself, had said that what he had seen could never come true.

"He just doesn't love us anymore," Millie whined softly, and brought the back of her hand to her forehead in a mock swoon. "Whatever shall we do?"

"Trundle on regardless, I should think," Teddy chimed in with a mischievous smile, "knowing we are doomed to be but sidelines in the show of Harry's life."

Harry's face warmed. "Come on guys, quit it."

Millie looked about to take the mickie some more, but after taking in his expression, she let it go. "Why's that bother you, that maybe you can't be everywhere at once?"

Harry shrugged. His friends let him get away with the non-answer far more often than Snape did. But this time, shrugging made him feel stupid. "I'm sorry I'm not a good friend," he said quietly.

Both of them stared.

Teddy spoke first: "That's dumb."

"What?"

"You are a good friend. So shut up," Millie said, and then stuck out her tongue.

Harry couldn't help but laugh.

--HPSSHPSSHPSS--

On the day of the next Quidditch Match, the Slytherin team had a pleasant surprise.

Flint made the announcement as they were suiting up for the game. "Our Head of House will be acting as referee for this match."

"Excellent," said Terry Higgs. "There's no way we can lose now."

"As if we would against the Puffies anyway," said Draco. He was Chaser in today's match as Rufford was in the Hospital Wing, afflicted with an unidentifiable curse of some kind.

"Don't be so cocky, Malfoy," Flint growled. "It's attitudes like that what'll lose us the game. You do your best on the field no matter who we play, or I'll have Wilkes come in instead. Got it?"

"Yeah," Draco said, rolling his eyes.

"What's that?" Flint barked.

"I said, Yes, Captain! Heard you loud and clear!"

Harry turned his face into the sleeve of his robes to hide his snicker. Malfoy gave him a cheeky grin while twirling a finger near his ear, and Harry nearly lost it. Thankfully, after giving Draco a scowl, Flint had turned to lambasting the beaters now, and didn't see them.

"I can't believe I get to be in the game today," Draco murmured to Harry as both of them began lacing up their boots. "My Father's come to see me play."

"Yeah?" Harry said, interested despite himself. Lucius Malfoy was something of a legend in Slytherin, and the upper years were always vying for his favor in getting placements after graduating, especially in the Ministry. And Harry knew, from the long-ago dress down with Snape, that Draco's father could be rather hard on him. He hoped Draco did well today, for both their sakes. "How about your Mum?"

"Mother couldn't make it. She has some charity event she's running," Draco added with a wrinkled nose. "She's always doing stuff like that."

Harry finished with his boots and started on the elbow pads, the last to be applied before he put on his gloves. "My aunt was like that, always some society thing or another."

"Was?" Draco asked with a lifted eyebrow. "She's dead?"

I wish, thought Harry. "No . . . well, except to me, I guess."

Draco snickered. He started putting on his gloves, the green leather ones Harry had gotten him for Christmas. "Thanks for these. They fit very well."

"You're welcome." Harry hadn't received anything in return, but that didn't matter to him. He was glad Draco liked the gift.

"One more thing," Flint growled loudly over everyone's conversations. "Listen up. The Puffies beat Ravenclaw last fall, and lost to Gryffindor last month, so we don't want them getting a bunch of points they can use to get close to us in Final scoring. You Beaters keep on their Chasers; I'll take any points they score out of your hides. And Potter, I want you to catch that bloody snitch as soon as possible. Got it?"

Harry nodded. "Yes, Captain."

"Good. All right, you lot. Time to mount up!"

Just like last time, Harry's stomach did a tumble and flip as he neared the door of the locker room. He could do this. He could. And with Snape as referee, he wouldn't have to worry so much about Quirrell trying to hex his broom.

Probably.

As one, the team got on their brooms and flew out of the dressing room, Flint first, then their Chasers, then the other Beater, the Keeper, and then Harry, the Seeker at the end.

Three-quarters of the stands were silent or booing as they emerged, but the Slytherin quarter was standing and cheering, waving flags and shooting out sparks of silver and green, and they made up for the hostility and apathy of the other Houses. Professor Snape, looking dour, sat his broom casual as you please near the announcer's booth and watched all his players. Harry, in particular, could feel the weight of the man's gaze. The team took a lap around the pitch, then settled in the air near the Slytherin goal posts and waited for the Puffies' to join them.

A moment later, the other team flew out of their locker room in a swath of yellow. The crowd went wild.

Harry shook his head, watching the Gryffindors trying to out do each other to make sure everyone knew they supported the Hufflepuffs, everything from shooting yellow sparks into the air, to sending up holo-images of badgers going after bright green snakes to stomp and/or choke them to death.

Nice.

Immediately after the Puffies took their lap around the pitch, Madam Hooch called them all in, so the Captains could shake hands before she gave the signal for the game to begin. Flint looked disgusted as he slapped Cedric Diggory's hand away, but Madam Hooch didn't say anything against him.

Snape merely sneered.

"Up you go!" called Madam Hooch, and the game was on.

Seconds after he had risen into the air, Harry caught sight of a long silver beard in the stands. He looked over his shoulder and, sure enough, it was Dumbledore, settled in the faculty box, looking mildly amused. Though he wanted to, Harry did not peer too closely at the others in the box to try and find Quirrell. He just concentrated on finding the . . .

The Snitch! Just behind Snape's billowing black cloak. Harry flew a little distance away from it, to try and lure Diggory into following him. Then he turned abruptly, angled his broom into a steep dive, and flew as fast as he could toward the fluttering golden ball. Between one breath and another, he streaked past Snape in a blur of green and grabbed the Snitch faster than you can say, "Slytherins Win!"

Those were the next words Harry heard as he came out of his dive, holding the Snitch aloft. His fellow Slytherins darted in to fly around him and congratulate him on a great catch.

"They didn't even score once!" Flint said.

"Neither did we," pointed out Draco, but Flint scowled at him.

"That's not his fault. You did great, Potter!" said Bletchley. "I don't think anyone's ever caught the Snitch so fast."

"Thanks," was all Harry had time to say before the Slytherins took their obligatory victory lap around the stadium while three quarters of the audience booed them again. It was kind of annoying, actually. But Slytherins never let that sort of thing get to them, at least not in front of anyone else. In private, now . . .

Once they all hit the ground, the rest of the House and some other fans, such as Lucius Malfoy, swarmed the field to congratulate the team. A hand rested on Harry's shoulder briefly, and before he could shake it away, he heard Dumbledore murmur, softly enough no one else could hear, "Well done. I'm glad to see you haven't been brooding about that mirror . . . been keeping busy . . . excellent."

A bit confused, Harry watched as Dumbledore slipped away through the press of people, but was then caught up in accepting pats on the back and congratulations from other Slytherins. Lucius Malfoy shook his hand. Even Snape looked a bit less dour and gave him a terse nod. Harry grinned back at him.

An hour or so later, Harry left the locker room alone, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He couldn't ever remember feeling happier. He'd really done something to be proud of now -- no one could say he was just a famous name anymore. The evening air had never smelled so sweet. He walked over the damp grass, reliving the last hour in his head, which was a happy blur: Slytherins running to lift him onto their shoulders; Millie jumping up and down and laughing through a heavy nosebleed, Teddy cheering and pumping his fist into the air.

Harry had reached the shed. He leaned against the wooden door and looked up at Hogwarts, with its windows glowing red in the setting sun. Slytherin was still well in the lead. He'd done it, he'd shown Quirrell he wouldn't be scared off the pitch...

And speaking of Quirrell...

A hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible toward the forbidden forest. Harry's victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognized the figure's scuttling walk. Quirrell, sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner -- what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle he saw Quirrell enter the forest at a run. He followed.

The trees were so thick he couldn't see where Quirrell had gone. He flew in circles, lower and lower, brushing the top branches of trees until he heard voices. He glided toward them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree.

He climbed carefully along one of the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves. Below, in a shadowy clearing, stood Quirrell, but he wasn't alone. Snape was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on Quirrell's face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

"... d-don't know why you wanted t-t-to meet here of all p-places, Severus..."

"Oh, I thought we'd keep this private," said Snape, his voice icy. "Students aren't supposed to know about the Sorcerer's Stone, after all."

Harry leaned forward. Quirrell was mumbling something. Snape interrupted him. "Have you found out how to get past that beast of Hagrid's yet?"

"B-b-but Severus, I --"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," said Snape, taking a step toward him.

"I-I don't know what you--"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

An owl hooted loudly, and Harry nearly fell out of the tree. He steadied himself in time to hear Snape say, "-- your little bit of hocus-pocus. I'm waiting."

"B-but I d-d-don't --"

"Very well," Snape cut in. "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over and decided where your loyalties lie." He threw his cloak over his head and strode out of the clearing.

It was almost dark now, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

Harry could quite understand.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

"Harry, where have you been?" Teddy grilled him the moment he entered the main hall. It was only fifteen minutes after he had seen Snape and Quirrell together in the forest, and he wasn't sure what to make of what he'd seen. Why would Snape be trying to get past Fluffy? Why would he want the, what was it? The Sorcerer's Stone? And why would he be plotting with Quirrell, who they all knew was trying to kill Harry!?

"We won! You won! We won!" shouted Millie, thumping Harry on the back. Her face was cleaned up, but still bruised. "And I gave Weasley a black eye for calling me an ogre, and that Longbottom kid tried to take on Vince and Greg single-handed when Greg called him stupid! Stupid bint. He's still out cold in the Hospital Wing. That'll teach them to quit talking bad about us! Everyone's waiting for you in the common room. We're having a party. Flint and Bletchley got some cakes and stuff from the kitchens."

"Never mind that now," said Harry breathlessly. "Let's find an empty room, you wait 'til you hear this..." He made sure Peeves wasn't inside before shutting the door behind them, then he told them what he'd seen and heard.

Both of them stared when he was done, as if he'd grown a third eye. "Have you heard of the Sorcerer's Stone?" he asked.

Teddy shook himself to get over his shock and nodded. "It's legendary, supposed to be able to turn lead into gold, and also can be used to make the Elixir of Life, so the bearer would never die."

"The bearer?" Harry rubbed his hands over his face. "So, if someone was trying to steal it for a, a Dark Wizard or something, so he could come back to life . . ."

Millie's eyes went wide. "You don't think our Head of House has anything to do with this. Do you?"

"What am I supposed to think, Millie? He was talking with Quirrell about how to steal the Stone!" Harry shouted. A huge lump was lodged in his chest, the size of a fist, and it was squeezing his heart. Hard. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have believed Snape's lies?

"You think Snape's trying to force Quirrell to help him get the Stone?" Teddy asked. "Why? He wouldn't need that bumbling oaf."

"Except for the bit about how to get past Fluffy - and he said something about Quirrell's 'hocus pocus' - I reckon there are other things guarding the stone apart from Fluffy, loads of enchantments, probably, and Quirrell would have done some anti-Dark Arts spell that Snape needs to break through --"

"Harry!" Millie stopped him as his imagination played out many possibilities. She shook her head. "I know you have a hard time trusting adults, but you're a Slytherin! Snape wouldn't--"

"Wouldn't what? Betray me? Try to kill me?"

"Exactly."

Harry bit the inside of his cheek, hoping the sharp pain would keep him from screaming. She couldn't possibly understand. Everyone was against him. Everyone. "You were one of the hardest on his case at the start of term Millie. How come?"

"Well," she said, looking sideways at Teddy, who dragged his gaze away from Harry to meet her eyes, "We thought he wasn't being fair to you. 'Cause he wasn't . . . " she trailed off, shaking her head reluctantly.

"Wasn't what?" Harry pressed.

"Well, he wasn't following Rule One, but Harry--"

"Exactly," Harry interrupted. "I've been a fool to trust him just 'cause he changed his tune. We all have. I knew the new act was too good to be true; he was faking it, that's all. Now we just have figure out how to keep both of them from getting that stone and giving it to Voldemort."

In the dead quiet that followed, Harry held each of his friends' gazes, willing them to trust him and support him. If they didn't, he didn't know what he would do. "Are you with me?"

To his relief, they both nodded. "To the end," Teddy said.

Millie released the lip her teeth had captured. "To the end."

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! An especially HUGE thank you to Youka-chan for sending me the five thousandth review for Better Be Slytherin! Wowzers!

In another Wow, this story won the "Best Chemistry" award at The Quibbler! Check out that one, plus all the Runner-Up awards I won, too, via my profile.

Several passages in this chapter -- especially the dialogue between Snape and Quirrell -- were lifted directly from Chapter 13 of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone by JK Rowling.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 46

By jharad17

Warnings for language and reference to sexual abuse. Nothing graphic.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

Feeling the blood drain from his face, Severus shook his head quickly. "No, no, you're right, Headmaster. It will be as you say. He'll go to them for two weeks." He would just need to be nearby during that time, in case anything more than a few sharp words passed from the Muggles to the boy.

"Excellent. I'm pleased you agree." Dumbledore resumed his seat and gestured in dismissal. "Good luck at Saturday's match, Severus."

"Thank you, Headmaster." Severus nodded on his way out, not so keen on sharing this news with Harry, after all.

"Mr. Potter. Stay after class."

Potter threw Severus a look that, for the shortest of instants, was filled with pure terror. But the fear was gone before Severus had any idea of how to react, and the boy's blank mask slipped into place. "Yes, sir."

The students finished pouring -- and spilling, naturally -- their Fever Reducer potions into fluted vials and messily labeling them before cleaning their stations and leaving the classroom. Both Nott and Bulstrode gave Potter thinly veiled signs of encouragement, as if the Brat Who Lived to Give Anyone Named Snape Headaches were going to be punished for something.

What the hell was going on?

Severus had not wanted to keep Potter after class; he had wanted to discuss the summer with him during one of their evening chats, when both of them were relaxed, and he could perhaps get a few other questions in about the Dursleys. But the Brat hadn't let him. The last couple weeks had been very odd, and when one was the Head of Slytherin House when Harry bloody Potter was amongst their newest members, that was saying something. For the better part of three weeks, in fact, since the five-minutes-long Quidditch match against Hufflepuff, Potter had declined all of their normal, non-curricular get-togethers. He had not come to play chess or to ask questions about Lily, or to view pictures of her either. He had also not shown up for Occlumency training, and the Bloody Baron had informed him that Potter was busy, with Quidditch and homework and other issues and could not attend. But he could not be that busy, could he?

Severus had thought that the boy had somehow re-discovered the Mirror of Erised, since it had ensnared him once before. But when he mused about it aloud, once more the Bloody Baron had the answer for him. No, Harry Potter had not found the Mirror. Nor had anyone else, which was a bit of a relief, really.

Perhaps the Brat had found something else to hoard his time? Someone else. A girlfriend, perhaps?

"No," the Bloody Baron told him again. "Especially not after what happened with Gaius Avery."

Of course, Severus thought. Then again, ghosts didn't know everything. They could not be everywhere, though the Baron seemed keen to try, when it came to the Potter brat.

All the students were gone from the classroom, and Potter stood in front of him, all alone and looking it. "You wanted to see me, sir?" His hands were stiff and still beside him, and his eyes were wary, a cold green like the sea on a cloudy day.

If Severus had to, he would admit he was worried about the boy. The last two times he had shunned Severus had been because he was in trouble. The first time, when Potter had also been fearful and wary,

had been because of Avery. What if some other student were hurting the boy like that again? Severus was angry just thinking about it.

"I have some news you might appreciate," Severus said lightly, hoping to light a spark of life in Potter's eyes. "I told the Headmaster that, at least until recently, you have done well at the beginning stages of Occlumency, and he has agreed to allow you to spend most of the summer holidays with me, so I may continue your lessons."

Harry's mouth dropped open and the flicker of fear reappeared for another moment before it was banked.

"You will need to only spend two weeks with those Dursleys, Harry," Severus pushed, in case the boy didn't understand that he would be free of them for most of two whole months. "And I will be with you while you're in their 'care,' to make damned sure nothing goes amiss." He was looking forward to it, truth be told. Shaking up Petunia's perfect little world by appearing with her nephew in tow, along with a writ of occupation from the Headmaster. Poking his wand into the enormous belly of that husband of hers and listening to him squeal . . .

"Do I have to?" Potter asked.

It was Severus' turn to drop open his mouth, although he was quicker to recover. "What's this? Did I hear you correctly, Potter? You want to stay with your odious relatives?"

"No, sir . . . no, of course not. I just . . ." Potter looked away. His shoulders came up as if to ward a blow, as if he thought Severus would be angry enough to hit him, as if . . .

The truth hit him like a punch to the gut. The boy's recent avoidance behavior made much more sense now. "You just do not wish to stay with me."

Still looking away, Potter gave one, sharp nod.

It took Severus a minute to overcome his suddenly dry mouth in order to speak. What had happened? Had he misjudged everything? What

had gone wrong in the last month or so? Where was that sense of camaraderie they had shared around the holidays and the weeks that followed?

He'd thought the boy had enjoyed his company, and the truth was harder to accept than he could have imagined. But he could accept it; he had to. He had faced painful truths before. The truth, he was just beginning to understand, was that the boy didn't care about Severus Snape and didn't want to stay with him. He couldn't possibly. How could he? Snape should have known from the start. After all, how could Harry bloody Boy Who Lived Potter want to spend time with Severus Snape, the Great Greasy Bat of the Dungeons. He was no one the son of James Potter would want to be around, when he could be pruning hedges and being stuffed in a cupboard . . .

"Very well," he said in a flat, airless voice. "Get out."

Potter's head jerked up, looking startled and almost dismayed, as if the little wretch thought Severus would beg for the pleasure of his company. He had another think coming! "What are you waiting for, Potter?" he snarled. "A formal invitation? I SAID GET OUT!!"

The boy was halfway to the door before Severus finished shouting. Severus' hand closed on something hard. Looking down, he saw he had snatched up a vial of Fever Reducer as if to throw it at the miscreant's head. At the head of that ungrateful, overindulged, annoying, spoiled rotten, horrid, hurtful . . .

With a sigh, Severus sank down on a seat. His chest had not felt so heavy in years.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

The next few weeks, as spring term lumbered on through nearly endless rainy days, were like a bill board for hell. At least in Snape's opinion. He couldn't imagine the boy was having a better time of it. At least Potter was constrained by the rules to be respectful toward his elders, his professors in particular. Severus had no such compulsion laid on him.

"What do you call this . . . substance, Mr. Potter?" he drawled whilst peering into the boy's cauldron one Friday. "Stew?"

Potter glared at him. "It's a Calming Draught. Sir."

Snape glared back. "That's your opinion. Mine is that it is far too lumpy." He vanished away the perfectly decent -- if slightly less smooth than absolutely necessary -- draught with a flick of his wand. "Start over."

"But, sir! I haven't got enough--"

Snape broke in coldly, "Do I look like one of your mates, hmm? Someone who wants to chum about and listen to your whinging excuses? Start the potion over or you'll have a zero for the day."

Around him, the other students -- Gryffindor and Slytherin alike -- watched what was becoming an almost routine exchange. Yes, Severus realized he was being petty. Vengeful. Even cruel, perhaps. But he was angry, damnit. The boy had hurt him, and for no good reason! He wouldn't even say what was wrong, had barely spoken three words to Severus outside of class, and had continued to skive off from Occlumency. It was too much!

Without arguing further, Potter had begun chopping Bundimun eyes in very neat, even pieces while the oil and water base of the draught of his new potion came to a boil. Severus looked down his long nose at the boy and tried to figure him out. Again.

The following Tuesday evening, Severus was able to get Dumbledore to send Potter a note at dinner, asking the boy to come to his office afterwards. When Potter got there, Severus was waiting to march him down to his office for the bedamned Occlumency lesson. He would get to the bottom of the boy's foul behavior one way or the other.

Potter followed him into his office with that same blank mask he had been wearing in Snape's presence for weeks. Severus reminded himself (again) that this wasn't necessarily personal, and that, if nothing else, the boy's first four months in school had taught him that

the blank mask meant Potter didn't want the other person to know what he was thinking, or, more likely, feeling.

Trying to keep himself from lashing out at the boy, he recalled that children such as Potter, those from neglectful homes, often learned to hide all their feelings, even from themselves, as a defense mechanism. Their feelings were mocked, ignored or used against them, and thus were better not shown or even acknowledged to exist. What it meant now, for Potter, was that he didn't trust his old bat of a professor, the man who was about to go mucking about in his head. That was bad.

So he took a shot at the boy, hoping to get him to erupt and let out what was wrong before they started. "What's got you in a snit?" he asked airily. "Lose your favorite Chocolate Frog card?"

A brief tightening around the eyes was all he got in return. He poked again. "Did no one praise your amazing skills at Quidditch today?"

"No, sir," the boy said carefully. "It was just practice."

Maddeningly, Potter would not be provoked. He tried one last time. "I very much dislike wasting my time, Potter," he said, stressing the boy's last name because he knew how much the boy hated being addressed like that. "I've put my time and effort and my considerable talents in magic towards your betterment, into teaching you a very important and difficult skill which could save your life, and this is what I get in thanks? Surliness? Laziness? The least you can do, if it's not beyond your capabilities, is remember to show up for the lessons!"

Potter's mouth tightened, but all he said was, "Yes, sir."

So be it. If he would not trust having Snape in his mind, it would go harder for him, certainly. Neither of them would enjoy the coming lesson, but the experience would not cause Severus actual, physical pain.

"Very well. Stand over here," he directed. When Potter obeyed, he said, "Clear your mind. I will find out, one way or another, what you

are trying to hide from me." He smiled nastily as the boy's face paled. "You may attempt to block me."

Fear glimmered in Potter's green eyes for a second, reminiscent of that look of several weeks ago and their conversation about the summer. Snape was determined to find out why the boy was afraid of him -- he must be, to have turned down the deal about getting away from his relatives for the summer, right? -- and of having his thoughts accessed. Snape would find out, as he'd told the boy. One way or the other.

He lifted his wand and watched Potter do the same. "Legilimens."

He was immersed immediately in a tepid, slow spinning stream of thoughts and memories. Severus snatched at one randomly. In it, Harry was in the midst of a Defense Against the Dark Arts class. The room reeked of . . . garlic? Potter frowned at something Quirrell said and scratched at his forehead, his scar, his thoughts turning darker as he sensed a vampire or spirit of one such, in possession of Quirrell and staring at him, a spirit with mad, glowing red eyes, possessing him--

He was yanked from the memory, though not with any real skill or force. He latched onto another which looked better defended. Hidden behind a boiling black fog (easily penetrated; the boy was hardly trying!) was a door, partly open, which led to a bathroom stall and an arm snaking around his neck from behind and a hoarse cry of "No! Please!" before he was wrenched from that memory, too. He entered another very nearby, this time striking inward with sheer brutal force. He found dim light and the stink of sweat and Gaius Avery speaking, threatening Potter in a low, soft voice, yet at the same time, in the same tone, giving him compliments and inquiring about his skill on a broom. Severus didn't need to know exactly what was said to finally understand Potter's problem.

Of course.

What young boy, who had recently been physically and sexually assaulted by an older teen, would want to spend the summer with a man two times his size and thrice his age? No wonder Harry was

afraid. Except for the first night, when he had been forced to tell Dumbledore what happened, Harry had refused to talk about Avery, even when he woke from nightmares about the older boy in the middle of the night. . . . which Severus realized he had not been called to assist with for some long time. Harry's feelings about Avery and what had happened to him must have been growing and churning inside, given no way to get out, like festering, suppurating boils.

No wonder he had been snarly . . .

"GET OUT!" Harry screamed. He pushed again, and Severus was shoved completely out of his mind.

Before Severus could offer Harry a hand up from where he was sprawled on the floor, the boy shoved himself to his feet and flung himself at the door. He was gone, down the hall, with the Bloody Baron chasing after him, before Severus could draw breath to yell his name or even spell the door closed.

Well, fuck.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

During their next Potions class, on Friday, he made Potter do his potion twice again. Despite the same protests as before, Harry finished a second copy of his Deflating Draught before the end of class. Snape had known he could do it, but he was still annoyed that Potter hadn't blown up yet so he could assign detention. That's what he'd done at the start of the year to get the boy to talk to him. He'd assigned detention on top of detention until the boy had practically imploded . . .

Of course, he'd also ended up in the Hospital Wing with broken bones, and Severus had gotten a chewing out from Pomfrey . . .

With a sigh, he stalked away from Potter and his potion.

What really galled him was that he was normally very good at this with his Slytherins, teasing out details of the child's home life, or other

abuses and traumas of their lives, so they could better cope at school. He was known for it, and the other professors sometimes sought his advice with their own troubled cases. But Potter . . . Potter was an enigma. He could not seem to reach the boy any more. He had no idea what had suddenly turned the boy from a fresh-faced, fairly happy but still troubled child, excited about his first Christmas presents, into a more surly, wary, frightened child, all inside of a month.

Though . . . McGonagall reported no change in his behavior in her class, nor did Flitwick or Sprout. Was the cause of Harry's 180 in his relationship with Severus really all the incident with Avery rearing its ugly head? Perhaps it was because Snape knew what had happened? Snape didn't know if that was the answer, and not knowing vexed him very deeply indeed.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

"I'm worried about the Stone," Severus told Dumbledore a fortnight later. It was the first week of May, and the chill winds and rains of early spring were giving way to warmer weather and cloudless skies. Outside, the smell of lilacs, roses and peonies was at times overwhelming, especially near Sprout's greenhouses. Inside Dumbledore's office, of course, one was only ever overwhelmed by the host. "Quirrell is up to something. I think he's planning something soon."

"I don't see how," Dumbledore replied. He leaned back slightly in his chair so he could ruffle the feathers of the phoenix perched by his head. Fawkes, the overgrown chicken, seemed to appreciate his efforts and leaned into the "chin" scratches along his neck and the edges of his beak.

"Well, Albus, he would find it easy to get past the troll, for one thing. His contribution, was it not?"

Dumbledore's blue eyes narrowed briefly behind his spectacles, and his hands dropped into his lap to play with the ends of his beard. It was one of the only "nervous" tells the man had, as far as Severus could discern. "Why do you say that?"

"It's logical. He's always had . . . a way with lesser creatures, even when he was Muggle Studies professor. I would not be surprised to find that the troll which 'got in' to Hogwarts on Halloween was actually 'let in' instead."

Ignoring Severus' last comment, Dumbledore said, "Logical, yes. That's your strong suit, isn't it? Logic?" Albus' words were seemingly careless, but Severus had learned over a very long twenty years that nothing Albus had to say had anything of carelessness about it. What did he mean? Was it merely a reference to his puzzle part in the set of traps to the Mirror? Or was it something deeper. Uglier.

Or something to do with Harry?

"Slytherin's last Quidditch match is coming up," Dumbledore offered into the silence following his last statement. He took up the ever-full container of lemon drops on his desk top and offered them to Severus before taking one for himself. Severus demurred, and Albus popped the sweet in his mouth. "I expect your Seeker will perform well."

"Yes," Severus agreed, letting none of his worry about the boy show. Nor any of his exasperation at being put off about Quirrell. Or so he thought.

"When was the last time you spoke to Quirinus about his . . . possible loyalties?"

Frowning, Severus said, "A month ago? Six weeks? I've no idea. Why? Do you have more information? Has he figured out a way to get past Fluffy?" It was the only trap he knew would give everyone but Hagrid trouble, and Hagrid would have trouble with all of the others, having little magic of his own anymore, and no wand.

"Not to my knowledge, dear boy. Not to my knowledge. But . . . I imagine you were circumspect enough at that meeting. Discreet, were you not? Gave no hint to Quirinus that you might be anything but a helpful pawn in his Lord's plans to return?"

"I . . ." His frown deepened. He had played his part well. What was Dumbledore getting at? He decided to ask. Perhaps, this once, Albus would give him a straight answer. "What are you talking about, Albus? Do you suspect Quirrell knows I'm not one of His agents anymore?"

Dumbledore smiled softly. "Not at all. I merely speculate that, to the untrained eye seeking knowledge, a conversation of that sort would terribly, mistakenly illuminating."

No. Not even this once.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! You're all made of awesomesauce!

Stay tuned for the next exciting episode, with Dragons and Draco and more hijinks than you can shake a stick at.

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 47

By jharad17

Warnings: None

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

What was Dumbledore getting at? He decided to ask. Perhaps, this once, Albus would give him a straight answer. "What are you talking about, Albus? Do you suspect Quirrell knows I'm not one of His agents anymore?"

Dumbledore smiled softly. "Not at all. I merely speculate that, to the untrained eye seeking knowledge, a conversation of that sort would terribly, mistakenly illuminating."

No. Not even this once.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Harry stared at the black-shelled egg on Hagrid's table, watching it crack open even wider. The dragon egg was the most amazing thing he had ever seen, except maybe Quidditch or unicorns or the Mirror of Erised, and he was almost as excited as Hagrid, who was clapping his big hands together, his face lit with joy.

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Teddy, cocking his head to the side as he did when he was thinking deeply. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the village havin' a few drinks an' got into a game o' cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Millie.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'," said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library -- Dragon Breeding for Pleasure and Profit -- it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on 'em, see, an' when it hatches, like it's 'bout ter now, ye feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here -- how ter recognize diff'rent eggs -- what I got there's a Norwegian Ridgeback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but Teddy didn't. "Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," he said.

Hagrid happily ignored him as a bit of shell fell off, followed by a gout of flame from within the egg three inches high.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped onto the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body. It had a long snout with wide nostrils, the stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes.

It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs. "Bless him, look, he knows his mommy!" said Hagrid as he reached for the bucket of chicken blood and brandy.

The dragon sank its snout into the mixture, and loud slurping sounds came from within the bucket. "Do you see that?" Millie exclaimed. "It's so cute!"

Harry didn't know about cute, but the baby dragon was certainly interesting. And a bit frightening to tell the truth. Yet he and Teddy merely nodded, going along. Suddenly, the baby dragon reared up out of the bucket, snout covered with blood and flapping its wings as if it had seen something. Harry turned in time to catch a glimpse of a face at the window, one topped with red hair. Weasley!

Harry darted out the door in time to catch the boy before he'd gotten far. "Ron, wait! Please!"

Ron Weasley turned, looking pale in the early evening gloom. "That's a dragon, that is. They're not allowed."

"Really? Hagrid didn't say." He gestured at the door. "Do you wanna see it? It's just hatched."

Curiosity warred with indignation on the Gryffindor's face.

"C'mon," Harry wheedled. "It's really neat."

"All right," Ron gave in. "Where did Hagrid get a dragon egg anyway?" he asked as they went inside. "They're supposed to be illegal."

"Ah, well," Hagrid said, seeing their newest guest. "That's what I tol' the stranger las' night. He din't take it well, but he 'greed I could take the egg off his hands." He grinned happily at the little creature, who promptly bit his thumb. "Isn't he lovely? I think I'll call him Norbert."

Hagrid spent the next few minutes feeding the dragon the bucket of blood and brandy, then trying to soothe the dragon from a case of indigestion, complete with bursts of alcohol-tinged flame.

"Maybe music'll work on little Norbert. Does wonders for Fluffy, it does."

Harry plucked the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas out of his back pocket, where he sometimes kept it, so he could play it when his spirits needed a lift. But when Harry put it to his lips and blew a few practice notes, the dragon tried to bite it and wrench it from his grasp. Harry managed to keep hold of his flute, but he put it away rather than try again. "I don't think music will work this time, Hagrid."

"Guess, not."

Later, as the four students made their way back up to the castle, Ron said, "Hagrid could get into serious trouble, you know. Dragon

breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles from noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden, and anyway, you can't tame dragons. It's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"Charlie?" Millie asked.

"My brother. He works at a dragon preserve."

"In Romania," said Teddy, his face taking on his deep thinking expression.

"That's what I said," said Ron, going a bit red in the cheeks.

"Which might be the best place for little Norbert, right?" Harry asked quickly.

"I think it would not be a bad idea to give Hagrid the opportunity to let the dragon go," Teddy said. "He's going to find out very quickly that it's hard to keep a fire-breathing dragon in a small, wooden hut."

"Did you see how much it had grown in just an hour?" said Millie. "That Norwegian Ridgeback will outstrip a niffler before the end of the night."

"Niffler?" Harry whispered to her.

"Later," she whispered back before saying more loudly, "Whyn't you ask your brother if the preserve can take in another dragon, Weasley? That way, Hagrid won't get in any trouble and the little fella will have somewhere nice to grow up."

Harry grinned at her. "You're really taken with widdle Norbert, aren't you."

Millie punched his arm. Hard. "Yeah, as much as you fancy Fluffy."

"Oh, eww."

"Who's Fluffy?" Ron asked. "Hagrid mentioned the name, too."

Harry, Millie and Teddy exchanged glances. Teddy shrugged. "Might as well tell him. It's not like it's that big a secret if we found out."

Harry nodded and beckoned Ron closer so he could speak softly, even though they were still a hundred feet from the castle doors. "Fluffy is a cerberus. A three-headed hell hound. It's what's on the third floor, the reason we're all warned away from there."

"A . . . a cerberus? In the school? Are they mental?"

"Quite probably," said Teddy.

"But why? Why is there a hell hound on the third floor?"

"We figure it's guarding something," Millie told him, which was the truth. But, after a flick of a glance at her fellow Slytherins, she added, "We don't know what, though," which was not, really.

Ron's face had gone all funny, like he was passing gas, but then Harry realized the other boy was thinking -- it was the same face he wore during their occasional chess games, specifically the ones in which Harry did better than usual (and sometimes won.) "I wonder," he said after a moment, "if Hagrid has told anyone else what soothes 'Fluffy' to sleep."

The three Slytherins exchanged another glance. It was a very good question.

--BETTER BE SLYTHERIN--

Almost two weeks later, when Norbert was the size of a large dog and had poison fangs to boot, having bitten Ron when he visited one afternoon, Harry and Teddy were heaving a crate full of dragon up many, many steps to the top of the highest tower of Hogwarts. The two of them and the crate were covered by Harry's Invisibility Cloak. Millie was their lookout and guide, since neither of them could see much more than their feet. She led them up to the tower's top by as quick a route as possible, and they tried very hard to keep quiet. It

was nearly midnight, so they were in danger of being caught out of bounds, but it was only at night that Norbert could be transported by broom across British skies to Romania.

They were almost there. Everything seemed to be going splendidly, in fact, until . . .

"Well, well, well. We are in trouble, aren't we," a nasty voice said, just as they reached a landing and could pause for a breath. Filch!

"Good evening, Mr. Filch," said Millie, proper as could be. Harry's knees knocked together and he forced them to stop. If they were caught, they'd all have to face some vile punishment, and Hagrid would get in really serious trouble, too. What was Millie doing? The crate grew heavier and heavier in his arms as they stood there, muscles trembling while they were forced to stand still. Sweat rolled off his brow into his eyes.

Filch's voice became more oily. "What are you doing out of bed, missy? It's far past curfew. Your Head of House will want to hear about this, oh, yes he will."

Mrs. Norris, Filch's cat, came sniffing around the boys' legs, and they stood perfectly still, not wanting to let her under the cloak, where she would disappear. There was no way Filch would miss seeing that.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Filch, I'll . . ." Millie broke off suddenly, then gasped and pointed down the stairs in the opposite direction of Harry and Teddy and their dragon. "What the . . . Did you see that?!" she demanded, her eyes wide. "Peeves!" she shouted as she tore after the figment of her imagination, forcing Filch to chase her, or else let her go without punishment. Mrs. Norris bounded after them, apparently forgetting about her earlier sniffing.

"Peeves!" Filch roared as he raced down the stairs. "I'll get you this time!"

The boys stifled the laughter that wanted to bubble up and started moving up the stairs again instead. Millie had saved them!

This last set of stairs led to the top of the tower, and when they reached it at last, they were both panting for breath. Norbert was just waking from the dose of sleeping draught Hagrid had given him, and he started snapping and clawing at the sides of the crate. Fortunately, a young man stepped forward from the gloom of the tower top, under the overcast sky. He was skinny, but his arms were cords of muscle, and his skin was dark brown from the sun. "Ron?" he asked.

Harry and Teddy shed the Invisibility cloak. "No, I'm Harry. Ron couldn't make it, 'cause this blighter bit him. But Charlie told him you'd take Norbert to Romania for us?"

"We can. I'm Edward, Charlie's friend. These other blokes are helping out. Let's get the wee beast strapped into the harness." Over the next few minutes, they did just that. The four broom riders had a harness ready for the crate, to carry it between them, so no one person was saddled with all the weight.

Harry and Teddy said a quick goodbye to Norbert as the broom riders flew off the top of the tower, and Harry grabbed his cloak as they headed downstairs again.

In the Slytherin Common Room, Harry and Teddy waited up for Millie to return. While they waited, Harry wondered aloud to Teddy why Snape hadn't known they were out of bounds.

"He only has his alarms and such up for the first couple months or so each year. After that, he figures students know enough not to get caught, and he doesn't have to chase after us all the time. My cousin graduated last year, and she told me our Head drops any special alarms around Christmas."

Harry nodded, glad to know that, but also wondering to himself where the Bloody Baron had been tonight. Maybe he and Snape were together, talking or plotting together, both of them assuming Harry was asleep in bed. While sitting and waiting for Millie to come in, Harry experienced a strange sense of longing. For some weird reason, he wished he could confide in the professor like he used to do. He would love to tell the professor about the dragon. Oh, not to get Hagrid in trouble, of course, but because he would have liked to

share his first sighting of a dragon with the man -- though not tonight's adventure, certainly. But he couldn't. He couldn't share anything like that anymore. After all, Snape was working with Quirrell to try and kill him . . . no, he couldn't think that, not really. Snape wasn't trying to kill him, probably. But he was trying to get the Stone.

A Stone that would bring Lord Voldemort back to life, and back to power as well. With that Sorcerer's Stone, and the potion he could make with it, Voldemort would let loose another reign of terror such as the one he'd unleashed before Harry's parents had been killed. It was likely Voldemort would try and kill Harry again.

Once more, Harry wished Snape wasn't involved with the scheme. He wished it really, really hard. But any doubts he had had of the man's intentions towards him had been squashed quite soundly in Potions class week after week for the last couple months. Snape had belittled him each day and snarled at him, and then vanished his potions and made him do them over or get no credit. And his eyes . . . Snape's eyes were dark and cold now, like black tunnels leading nowhere.

Millie slipped into the room while he was turning this over in his mind, and the two boys jumped up and ran over to her. No one else was around -- it was nearly 3AM -- and they peppered her with questions. "What did he do? Did you get away? Did Filch tell Snape?"

Millie held up her hands as answer, and they were red and raw, as if she had been cleaning with bleach and not using gloves. Harry said, "I've got some salve," as Teddy led her to the choice spot by the fire in the dungeon room and sat her in the comfiest chair. Harry retrieved the container quickly, a bottle of salve he and the professor had made just after Christmas break, when Harry's hands were getting red and sore from the wind and rain during Quidditch practice, with the minimal gloves Seekers wore. The salve helped soothe his raw, chapped skin, just like Snape said it would.

Millie took the salve and spread it on her hands gratefully.

"It's got Murtlap essence in it," Harry told her. "One of the best things for burns and cuts, too." He grinned as her pained expression faded. "Are we going to have to prank Filch? What did he make you do?"

"He made me scrub the entire Entrance Hall, can you believe it? At this time of night? I might as well stay up. If I go to bed now, I'll sleep till lunch."

They all agreed and spent the next couple hours, until the rest of the House was stirring, talking about Norbert and Hagrid's propensity for giving away sensitive information.

"It's mad," Teddy said solemnly. "I like him well enough, but I would never trust Hagrid with a secret, especially one like this, one which involves You-Know-Who."

Harry agreed. "It's almost like Dumbledore wants someone to be able to get the Stone. But why?"

"I'd think a better question would be, but who?" Millie said, and then wondered, "Why bring it here at all? I mean, I know Gringott's got broken into just after they moved it -- which is a fine piece of fortune-telling on their part, no lie -- but, well, wouldn't this be the next place anyone would look? If the Headmaster had sent it to Siberia in a Yeti's backpack instead, it'd be safe as houses."

"Maybe Flamel is still using it to keep himself alive," said Teddy. "So it has to be where he can get to it."

"But then someone would always be going in and getting past Fluffy!"

"Hush, Bulstrode, you'll wake the dead. The Stone produces the Elixir of Life once a year, so it's not like he's got to pop in to see the thing every weekend. Flamel probably heard someone was trying to get his Stone and asked the Headmaster to keep it safe for him. They're supposed to be old friends, right?"

"That's what it says on the Frog card," Harry said. "But I don't know, Teddy. Seems like a lot of holes in that theory."

"All right then, how about this: Professor Dumbledore is supposed to be the most powerful wizard of his age, the one who beat Grindelwald, and the only one of whom You-Know-Who is said to be afraid. So long as the Headmaster is in residence, I wager he's got loads of warning spells and such in place so he can swoop down on anyone doltish enough to try and steal something out from under his nose."

Teddy certainly had a point. Harry nodded, nearly satisfied. So long as Dumbledore was at Hogwarts, the Stone was safe from Quirrell and Snape and Voldemort, too.

--BETTER BE SLYTHERIN--

()The next two weeks, heading into the end of May, were a flurry of activity as they started revising for their exams in earnest. In years to come, Harry would never quite remember how he had managed to get through his exams when he half expected Voldemort to come bursting through the door at any moment. Yet the days crept by, and there could be no doubt that Fluffy was still alive and well behind the locked door.

As June began, the air was sweltering hot, especially in the large classroom where they did their written papers. They had been given special, new quills for the exams, which had been bewitched with an Anti-Cheating spell.

They had practical exams as well. Professor Flitwick called them one by one into his class to see if they could make a pineapple tap dance across a desk. Professor McGonagall watched them turn a mouse into a snuffbox -- points were given for how pretty the snuffbox was, but taken away if it had whiskers. Snape made them all nervous, breathing down their necks while they tried to remember how to make a Forgetfulness potion. ()

Harry did the best he could, trying to ignore the stabbing pains in his forehead, which had been bothering him for days. He'd had pains like this before, but never so often. And then, the night before their last exam -- History of Magic -- Harry's had an especially dark nightmare with Voldemort as the star, where Harry got the impression that the mad wizard was ready to go after the Stone.

That next afternoon confirmed it.

Purely by chance, he heard from one of the Weasley twins that the Headmaster had been called away to London unexpectedly.

"And we had all our notes to give him about a new verse for the school song," bemoaned Fred. Or maybe George.

"We'll just have to sing it ourselves, without adult preview," said George. Or maybe Fred.

Dumbledore was gone! This was Voldemort's chance to steal the Stone. Harry would bet anything that Dumbledore's visit to London was only a ruse, maybe a letter sent to him by a faker, by Quirrell, perhaps, or even Snape. He'd be in for a surprise when he reached his meeting in London, Harry was sure.

Harry raced off to tell his friends what had happened, and almost collided with a tall dark figure sweeping down the central stairs. Snape!

"Good afternoon," Snape said smoothly.

Harry stared at him.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, with an odd, twisted smile.

"I was --" Harry began, without any idea what he was going to say.

"You want to be more careful," said Snape. "Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something."

Harry flushed, but turned to go outside.

Snape called him back. "Be warned, Potter -- any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure your last days here are quite miserable. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staff room.

Harry stared after him. Snape had as good as said that he knew about Harry bringing the dragon to the tower, but not only that, he was threatening Harry with dire consequences if he went out tonight, the very night Voldemort was going to go for the stone.

Snape was going to go for the stone himself tonight. Harry knew it!

"Millie!" he cried upon entering the Common Room. He spied her across the room on one of the couches and raced to her side, sliding to a stop near her elbow. "Millie," he repeated, his voice much softer. "It's happening! The Old Man has left the building."

"What?" she exclaimed, finally looking up from the tangle of cat's cradle she had strung on her fingers. "When?"

"Just now," he whispered. "It was 'unexpected,' and no one knows why he's gone, just that he is. It's the perfect time, you see? To do it."

"To get the . . . thingy, you mean?"

"Yes! We have to stop them."

"Harry . . ." Millie looked down at her hands again for a moment. Even with the salve, it had taken days for her skin to heal completely from her last detention. "Shouldn't we tell someone? One of the prefects, maybe? Or . . ." She hesitated, and Harry knew what she wanted to say.

"Or Professor Snape? Are you mental? He's the one who wants the thingy anyway; he won't do anything except laugh."

Millie pursed her lips, and Harry was instantly sorry he'd called her mental, but before he could apologize, she said, "How do you want to stop them, then?"

"Well, I . . ." Harry closed his mouth and fumed. He had no idea, really. He couldn't tell Dumbledore, as if he'd be believed anyway . . .

he could tell the Bloody Baron, if he could find the ghost, but wasn't sure that would do any good. As it was, the Bloody Baron couldn't stop anyone from stealing the stone, either, as he didn't have a real body. Unless . . .

"See?" she said evenly. "I can go see him if you--"

"No," he interrupted. "I know what I can do."

With a frown, Millie said, "What?"

"I can go get the Stone myself."

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! Alas, my thoughts on this chapter before I wrote it were different from those when I did write, so there was no Draco in it, my apologies. The text between the two sets of () is ripped straight from JK Rowling's first book.

I figure there're about five or so chapters left of this story before it's done. I still have a line for Reviewer Number Five Thousand which I need to find a place for, and we still need to have the actual Rescue of the Stone thing, not to mention find out if Harry and Snape will reconcile before the end of the school year. Good times ahead!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 48

By jharad17

Warnings for language.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

What was Dumbledore getting at? He decided to ask. Perhaps, this once, Albus would give him a straight answer. "What are you talking about, Albus? Do you suspect Quirrell knows I'm not one of His agents anymore?"

Dumbledore smiled softly. "Not at all. I merely speculate that, to the untrained eye seeking knowledge, a conversation of that sort would terribly, mistakenly illuminating."

No. Not even this once.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

AND:

Harry closed his mouth and fumed. He had no idea, really, how he could save the Stone. He couldn't tell Dumbledore, as if he'd be believed anyway . . . maybe he could tell the Bloody Baron, if he could find the ghost, but he wasn't sure that would do any good. As it was, the Bloody Baron couldn't stop anyone from stealing the Stone, either, as he didn't have a real body. Unless . . .

"See?" Millie said evenly. "I can go see him if you--"

"No," he interrupted. "I know what I can do."

With a frown, she said, "What?"

"I can go get the Stone myself."

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

Severus Snape did not care for springtime. Every April, he sneered at pretty little flowers erupting from the soil and harrumphed at the sight of birds returning from the south, and he scowled at the itch of pollen in his eyes. Wizards did not have allergies, of course. Just . . . discomfort and an occasional sneeze. So, no, Severus did not care for spring or spring like things, but he tolerated the change of seasons fairly well, if only because it meant the end of another school year was nigh.

This year, however, spring was especially bleak. Little things annoyed the professor, things he normally overlooked. He snapped at students for stirring their cauldrons too loudly and snarled at Third Years who added ingredients from too great a height above their cauldrons. He got headaches from the bursts of sunlight in the Great Hall's tall windows. Mrs. Norris' paws hitting the flagstones were like cymbals in his head, and he gave Filch a tongue lashing for letting "that fleabag" wander about on its own. When the fleabag in question tried rubbing against his leg through his not-quite-cat-hair-proof robes, he growled at her. There may even have been some cursing.

This spring, in fact, everything seemed duller and tepid and annoying, from the children's piping voices to the pitter pat of the warm rains on the windows. Everyone else around him, he felt, was uncivil and discourteous and overwhelmingly obtuse, and he greatly wished he could take a cane to each of their backsides. Half the student population he'd like to hang by their thumbs -- one area in which he was in complete agreement with Filch -- and the other half he wanted to send to bed without supper.

Of course, Severus did not say any of this. He did not even complain overmuch about any of his students or colleagues, their actions or attitudes, no matter what chiding the Headmaster gave him about the issue. He was just . . . frustrated. Yes, that was it. But even worse, his frustrations sank deep into his core and had pervaded every one of his daily tasks. He could not pinpoint the cause for the longest time, until he realized that when the First Year Slytherins came in for class or dinner or tutoring, his level of ennui rose exponentially. It was then he realized that his sense of frustration and annoyance increased

whenever Harry Potter appeared to notice Severus, and his young face turned to stone, whether at meal times or during class or when the brat was coming inside, drenched and shivering, from Quidditch practice in the rain.

All in all, Severus did not understand what was wrong with Harry Potter, and it frustrated him greatly. This frustration had finally led to his current situation, a little more than a week after his discussion with the Headmaster about Quirrell.

Severus was in his office, seated at his desk. Two Slytherin First Years occupied the seats opposite him. It was heading into late May . . . and Severus had just concluded a conversation with the Bloody Baron that made him wish the man were corporeal so Severus could blast him to smithereens.

The ghost was just so . . . frustrating! He would never divulge Harry Potter's secrets, the bloody Bloody Baron had pronounced, and he seemed to take a great deal of satisfaction in relaying the message, too.

With a shake of his head, Severus glared at the two children. He would not dwell on the Baron now. Not when he had fresh victims, er, students to question. First, to take them off guard and loosen their tongues. "You know, of course, why I have called you into my office, correct?"

The two students exchanged a glance. "No, sir," they said together.

Right. The hard way, then.

"From my records," he said, flipping through one of his grade books, the one which automatically updated First Years' grades after he finished marking one of their assignments, "I see neither of you have failed to submit a single one of my assigned essays and yet, you, Miss Bulstrode, seem incapable of rendering your work in penmanship which does not cause my retinas to bleed, and as for you, Mr. Nott, your footnotes often rival your essays for length and relevant content."

He paused, letting them work out what he had said before listening to their promises to do better. Mr. Nott's assurances were especially piquant, and Severus was hard pressed not to smile at the boy's wit even whilst wondering how he'd come by it; Nott Senior was not known for his stimulating repartee, after all.

And now to drop the boom: "Alas, the third part of your little trio, if I may use the term, is not present to receive due criticism on his work for my class. This is most vexing. I trust you understand."

Another exchanged glance between them. Another, "No, sir."

Severus drew himself up and slapped his palm on his desk top. "Where is Harry Potter?"

The children jumped.

"I don't know, sir," said Bulstrode, the first to recover. "Have you checked the pitch? He's often there."

"I have, and he was not, and that is not the point at all. Mr. Potter has been absent in more ways than one of late, and I wish to know why. Since you two seem his closest . . . comrades, I find it prudent to put you to the question." He smiled, a quick baring of teeth. The girl visibly recoiled.

"He's indisposed," Nott said a moment later. He had the same rat face as his father, but it seemed that was the only thing he possessed of the man, if he was truly chums with Potter.

"For three months?" Severus growled.

The brats exchanged another look. One would think they were Legilimens, or at the very least, plotting something. Something of a rules-breaking nature. He would have none of it. He gestured to Bulstrode with his wand. "Tell me what you know."

After a quick glance at her co-conspirator, Bulstrode said, "Well . . . you remember how it was at the beginning of the year?" Her face was

pinched, as if she had been the focus of his derision and contempt at the time.

"Go on," Severus said instead of answering.

"Well, erm . . ."

"Oh, spit it out, Millicent!" Nott interrupted. "Maybe he can help. Professor, Harry overheard you and Professor Quirrell talking together after our last Quidditch match, and he's sure you're planning to steal the Sorcerer's Stone, either for yourself or on orders from You-Know-Who, who he's also sure is going to try and kill him again."

"Teddy!" Bulstrode gasped. "That's Harry's business! You know he--"

"It's this business which is like to get him killed, too, right?" Nott turned to Severus and glared. "He's been all kinds of out of sorts ever since then, and it's your fault, really."

Severus jumped to his feet, still reeling from the explanation. "My fault!"

Bulstrode nodded. "You've been treating him dreadfully in class, sir. You've ignored Rule One, and made it harder than ever for him to trust you. If he ever can again," she finished softly.

"It's true," said Nott. "He used to enjoy spending time with you, he told me, and playing chess or talking. But now he's just angry."

"Not just angry," Bulstrode said. "He thinks you betrayed him."

Severus stared at the two children. Harry felt betrayed. Over an understandable misunderstanding. Assuming, of course, that these two Slytherins were not lying through their teeth. There were several ways to ascertain their veracity, and Severus made use of one of the easiest and least detectable ways available to him.

With a wordless Legilimens, Severus explored the surface of the Nott boy's thoughts, touching no deeper than the edges. Underneath his adamant expression, the boy was calm, collected, and had quite an

organized little head on his shoulders. From the memory Severus saw first thing, he recognized the day that Harry bloody Potter decided that Severus Snape was The Bad Guy. The evening of the game against Hufflepuff, when every Slytherin had been flying high on the five-minute win Harry had given them . . . and he recalled his conversation with Quirrell in the woods, or enough of it to understand the boy's reaction anyway. And now, too, he knew what Dumbledore had been alluding to, as if the Old Coot could not have just told him out right and spared the two of them a lot of pain and angst. Damn him.

And damn his own pride, for thinking the worst of Harry automatically, even if it was natural for him to think ill of Potters in general. No wonder Harry did not want to spend the summer with him, if he thought Snape was a thief or worse, out to murder him. He should have known, after months spent in Harry's company, that the Boy Who Lived to Give Him Grief would not have openly disdained him for no good reason. And betrayal, or the appearance of it, that would be the greatest reason of all for disdain from this boy, who had lived every day for the last ten years feeling betrayed by his "family," who did not care for him. And who had spent the last few months feeling betrayed by the wizarding world for not taking an active interest in his welfare excepting as far as he could do things for them. Never caring about Harry for himself.

Now he was in a quandary. How to let the boy know he was mistaken about his Potions Professor's motives without getting into the history of his own involvement with the Dark Lord? That was nothing he wanted to shed light on. How could he do it without having the boy find out the worst about him: what he had done years ago that had gotten Lily and James Potter killed. Then Harry would be shunning him for a different reason, a valid reason. He needed . . . he wanted to protect the boy and take him out of his relatives' care, but to do that, Harry needed to trust him. It would take a certain amount of finesse . . .

"Er, Professor?" The girl in front of him coughed politely. "You aren't really trying to steal the Stone, are you, sir?"

Severus stared at her with cold, expressionless eyes, and let her own flushing skin advise her of his innocence. He did not bother to ask the two of them how they knew -- now -- what the hidden treasure was which Potter had confessed to knowing about months ago. He would put money on Hagrid's loose lips every time. It didn't matter, in the end.

"Are we done, sir?" the boy had the temerity to ask.

"Almost," he snapped. He held up one finger to caution them. "You must tell me -- I want your word -- if Mister Potter gets it into his head to do anything about the Sorcerer's Stone. I know all about your little night time mission to the tower with a crate full of Norwegian Ridgeback," he kept in a sour smile as both sets of eyes widened at his words, "so don't try to deny he's capable of harebrained schemes. I want your oath as Slytherins that you will inform me immediately if Potter tries anything foolish." He had seen too much Gryffindor courage (read: stupidity) in the boy's Slytherin green eyes to ever assume Harry would just let the Stone get stolen out from under him. "Promise me."

"Yes, sir," Nott said promptly, and Snape immediately wrote him off.

Bulstrode, on the other hand, hesitated before agreeing, and he was almost convinced she would hold to her word.

"Excellent. That is all."

The children escaped his office with alacrity and Severus went back to his deliberation as to how he could reconcile with Harry without making it obvious the boy's friends had informed on him. A tricky puzzle at best, but he comforted himself with the knowledge that he had several weeks left till the end of the school year. Exams were starting in a couple days, so he could wait until they were done before approaching Harry -- no sense in making final exams more nerve wracking than normal for the boy.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

On the last day of exams, Severus was coming down the central staircase, thinking about Harry Potter, when who should nearly crash into him but this same boy.

"Good afternoon," Snape said smoothly. The boy stared at him as if seeing an Inferius. He seemed agitated, wringing his hands together. "You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, smiling a little to put the boy at ease.

"I was --" Harry began, then trailed off as if he had no idea what to say.

Severus was struck by a sudden realization. Harry's behavior was far too anxious for a boy who had just finished his exams. He was near panic; it was in his eyes, and Severus had an inkling as to why. On his way to the staff room to meet with Minerva because Albus had been called away to London suddenly, Severus knew, somehow, that Harry knew about Albus, too. "You want to be more careful," he said in warning. "Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something."

Harry flushed, but turned to go outside.

Snape called him back. He needed to make sure that Harry didn't do anything as foolish as try to stop a thief who was likely working for the Dark Lord. The boy could be killed, or worse if he got involved, and Severus could not allow that under any circumstances. He needed to stay within the safety of Slytherin's walls tonight, and every night, until Quirrell's connection to the Dark Lord was exposed and he was safely locked away. The only way Severus could think of at the moment to keep Harry from getting in trouble was to say, "Be warned, Potter -- any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure your last days here are quite miserable. Good day to you."

He strode off in the direction of the staff room, not looking to see where Harry went. He did catch a glimpse of the Bloody Baron, far enough away from the boy that he did not seem to be hovering -- and perhaps Harry did not even realize he was still being trailed -- but still close enough to protect him, if it came to that. Good. That was one

less worry. At least the Baron would let him know if Harry tried to be some Gryffindor hero.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

A chime sounded in Severus' sitting room in his private quarters late that evening, alerting him to someone at the entrance from the dungeons, which was odd for several reasons. First, other Professors and -- especially -- the Headmaster invariably approached his rooms via the Floo. Secondly, no students should be out at this time of night, and besides, none of them were made aware of where his personal quarters were, except a select few, including Harry Potter, but they had always been shown to them via his office. What it meant, then, was a student was likely in trouble and Filch had caught them and, rather than wait till morning to present the miscreant, he had decided the middle of the night was best.

Frowning, Severus approached the "front" entrance of his rooms and cast a simple "Reveleo" to see who stood on the other side. The door (from his perspective only) went transparent, showing Theodore Nott in the dungeon corridor. Alone. Curiouser and curiouser.

After donning a spare black teaching robe hanging on a hook by the door, he cancelled the spell and opened the door, openly scowling. "Do you know what time it is, Mr. Nott? Well after curfew, I dare say--"

"Professor," the boy broke in, "I need to tell you something about Harry."

Severus' heart immediately picked up speed. His hand clenched around his wand, and he used it to gesture the boy inside. He checked the corridor, but no one seemed to be lurking about, before he closed the door. "Where is he? Is he hurt?" It would be just like that little demon! After everything he had done to try and keep him safe, too!

"No . . . I don't think so. Well, I'm not sure where he is. I think . . . I think he's going after the Stone. I heard him and Millicent talking earlier, and they said the Headmaster had been called away. I think Harry believes someone will try to get the Stone tonight."

Unsaid, of course, was that Harry thought Severus was going to steal the Stone. But Harry might actually be right about someone would try for it; this would be the perfect chance, after all, for Quirrell, who had been growing more furtive -- and pungent -- every day.

If Potter was right and Quirrell (who was working for the Dark Lord somehow) was trying to steal the Stone, and if the boy was giving in to his Gryffindor tendencies, then he was in a boatload of trouble, not least when Severus got his hands on him!

"How long ago?"

The boy startled. "How long?"

"When did you hear them talking?"

"This afternoon, just before dinner."

Just after he had spoken to Harry on the stairs then. No wonder the boy had been frazzled, making plans to sneak out, and then caught by the Professor he thought loathed him. "Why did you not tell me sooner?"

The boy bit his lip, uncharacteristically appearing worried. "I was keeping an eye on him tonight, and I would have stopped him from going . . . but he must have sneaked out with that cloak of his because I didn't see him leave, and when I checked a bit ago, he just wasn't there. That's why I came to you, sir."

"Very well," Severus said, his mind racing ahead to what Harry might be encountering at this very minute. "Thank you for telling me. Go back to your dormitory now."

"But, sir!"

"No arguments. Go to your dormitory now!" He opened the door to the corridor and fairly shoved the boy through it.

"Please, sir, I just wanted to say . . . Fluffy likes music."

Severus paled but nodded, then closed his door on the boy. He turned quickly and made his way to the fireplace. He would take the Floo to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, and if he had any kind of luck at all, Quirrell would be there and not stealing Stones nor killing Harry Potter.

The Floo billowed green flames around him, leaving him to stalk out of the fireplace and into the dark and deserted classroom. Damn. He stalked to the door and into the second floor corridor and continued stalking until he reached the third floor corridor where the door to Fluffy's room was.

As he approached, he saw the door already opened the merest bit. Deep throated growls emanated from the room. The monster was awake, it seemed, and in a temper. Well, what had the Nott boy said? That the beast liked music?

Severus eased the door farther open and slid inside the room whilst humming the school song, the rendition the Headmaster seemed fond of singing each benighted Opening Day Feast. The three-headed hell hound with sharp, pointy teeth turned towards him, jaws opening wider. Severus hummed louder.

Then the beast yawned, blinked heavily and turned around three times and laid down, his third muzzle resting half on the trapdoor leading to the maze below. Double Damn. Still humming like mad, Severus grabbed an armful of Cerberus mouth and thrust it off the trapdoor. The hell hound squirmed and murmured in his sleep like a happy puppy. For Merlin's sake . . .

Severus kept humming until he had the trapdoor open and had dropped down into the Devil's Snare below. The vines pulled tight around him and wrapped him in their coils, but he simply relaxed and the snare loosened, letting him fall through into the room below.

That must've been Pomona's contribution, he thought, as he brushed off his robes.

He walked forward, keeping one eye peeled for anything charmed (by Filius) or transfigured (by Minerva) and the other watching for a foolish Slytherin boy who was liable to get them both killed.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! Sorry this chapter has been so long in coming, but RL has hit me pretty hard of late. There are only a couple chapters left in this story, and then it will be on to Year Two!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 49

By jharad17

Warnings for language and some violence.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

Harry closed his mouth and fumed. He had no idea, really, how he could save the Stone. He couldn't tell Dumbledore, as if he'd be believed anyway . . . maybe he could tell the Bloody Baron, if he could find the ghost, but he wasn't sure that would do any good. As it was, the Bloody Baron couldn't stop anyone from stealing the Stone, either, as he didn't have a real body. Unless . . .

"See?" Millie said evenly. "I can go see him if you--"

"No," he interrupted. "I know what I can do."

With a frown, she said, "What?"

"I can go get the Stone myself."

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

AND:

The vines pulled tight around him and wrapped him in their coils, but he simply relaxed and the snare loosened, letting him fall through into the room below.

That must've been Pomona's contribution, he thought, as he brushed off his robes.

He walked forward, keeping one eye peeled for anything charmed (by Filius) or transfigured (by Minerva) and the other watching for a foolish Slytherin boy who was liable to get them both killed.

--HPSSHPSSHPSSHPSS--

After Harry left Millie that afternoon, he made some very fast plans. He didn't want to get either of his friends in trouble -- as he knew he was likely to be -- so he didn't share his ideas with them further. After dinner, when the Common Room was revved up with a post-finals party hosted by the 7th Years who were due to leave Hogwarts for the last time in a couple weeks, it was not difficult for Harry to sneak off under his Invisibility Cloak and go looking for the Bloody Baron.

Finding the Baron actually took the longest out of all his preparations. He had thought the Baron was watching him all the time, except while he was in his bedroom, but when he finally found the ghost, the Baron was hovering near the girl's bathroom on the second floor, the one none of the girls wanted to use, according to Hermione. Harry had never asked her why.

Harry removed only the hood of the Cloak as he approached the ghost. "Hello," he whispered. "I need a favor."

The Baron's eyes grew wide with surprise or fear. His voice was lower than usual when he intoned, "What are you doing out of bed, young Harry Potter? You should not be about on a night like this."

"A night when Snape tries to steal the Stone, you mean?"

"That is foolishness, as I have told you time and again. Severus Snape would never attempt to steal the Sorcerer's Stone."

"I heard him and Quirrell plotting," Harry said for the millionth time. The ghost sighed. "It's true!"

"I know what you believe you saw, but you must know that not everything you see is what is true."

Harry glared. He hated being told, however obliquely, that he was too stupid to understand what he had seen. "Whatever. Someone is going to steal the Stone tonight, and I want to stop them."

"That is a particularly Gryffindorish idea."

"Well, the Sorting Hat did say I could do well in Gryffindor."

The Ghost nodded slowly. "So you have said. I believe, however, on a night such as this, that you would do better to stay true to your more Slytherin qualities."

"I can't. If someone gets the Stone, then Voldemort will come back. He'll have even more power. Enough so he can kill me this time."

The Bloody Baron floated closer. His mouth was twisted angrily, and his eyes were like dark fire. "So you would put yourself within the man's grasp? Deliver yourself to a mad man by following him into the crypt? That is even more foolish than I imagined!"

"No, that's why I need your help!" Harry cried. "If we work together, we can get the Stone before Voldemort does."

"And how would we do that, Harry Potter?" the Baron spat.

"You have to possess me. Like you did before, when I was attacked in the dungeons. Possess me, but let me keep my memory."

"Absolutely not!"

"But you know way more spells than I do, and you can cast magic when you possess me." Harry pursed his lips and glanced over his shoulder, in the general direction of the stairs to the third floor, where Fluffy's room was. He tried his last gambit. "If you won't help me . . . it's not likely I'll make it out of there alive."

The Bloody Baron glared at him. "I could possess you and then just cast a stunner at us both. Keep you from the crypt."

"You could, but then I'd bleed out from your chest wound before anyone found me, like before. And you wouldn't be able to get help for me either, because of the stunning spell."

For a long moment, the ghost continued to glare, even as he moved closer and closer to Harry. Close enough that goose flesh rose on Harry's arms under the cloak. Finally, the Baron gave one sharp nod. A different, more admiring light entered his ghostly eyes. "You certainly are Slytherin enough, Harry Potter. I will do this. But you must let me control your body. I can not fight with you for control if we come up against an enemy."

"You can have control if we have to cast spells. But I control us the rest of the time."

"You foolish--"

"It's this way or no way, and I go alone!" Harry interrupted.

"Very well," the Bloody Baron said, not sounding very happy.

"Swear on it."

"I swear on it," the Baron said, and Harry let the ghost flow into his body before he pulled the hood of his cloak over his head again and they vanished from sight.

It took a fair amount of wriggling inside his own skin for Harry to get accustomed to the feel of the Bloody Baron inside his head and body. No, accustomed was not the right word; it made it sound like he'd gotten used to the sensation; he could never get used to this . . . persistent tingling cold, so bitterly icy that his nerves burned, as if on fire. The only outward sign of the Baron's possession was a low level gleam of Harry's skin, which could almost be attributed to moonlight . . . if moonlight could have penetrated to this long, dark hallway.

The Bloody Baron's "voice" inside his head was the worst part, though. The words seemed to echo through him while at the same time feeling almost like his own thoughts. Don't want this, he thought, and immediately got the thought back, then tell me to get out, as if he were arguing with himself. Can't. Sucking chest wound, remember? An odd, disjointed chuckle bubbled up in his mind. I could Obliviate

you again afterwards. Take control and . . . No! That was worse. I can . . . we can handle it.

He was not sure who the last thought belonged to. It was beyond freaky.

By the time they reached the third floor corridor and Fluffy's door, Harry had started to feel less ragged about the intrusion of the ghost.

Ready? Harry asked him/Baron/self as he reached out to cast Alohomora at the door. But the door was already open, just a crack. From inside, they/he could hear the tinny sound of a small, slightly off-key harp. Harry inched the door open wider until he could smell the heavy scent of dog, along with sulfurous undertones.

Sulfurous undertones? he wondered. Where did that term come from? . . . Oh.

Another low, ghostly chuckle burbled from his subconscious. Creepy.

Harry eased himself through the door to find Fluffy, the three-headed hell hound, sound asleep. Excellent. Seemed Hagrid was right about music soothing the beast. Before he had gone three steps, however, the somewhat soothing sound of the harp ceased and Fluffy's eyes started to open. One blink, then another, was all it took for Fluffy to be on his feet and growling. The hellhound could not see Harry/Baron beneath his Invisibility Cloak, but the beast was sniffing the air like a hound dog, attempting to home in on him.

Harry gulped, loudly.

Fluffy jerked around and hunched down as if to lunge.

The flute, his mind reminded him.

Oh, yeah. He whipped the thin, carved flute out of his back pocket and played a few quick notes, then a few more, more slowly, as he watched Fluffy's eyes droop.

Well done, he thought -- no, the Baron thought -- when Fluffy yawned hugely, showing teeth, before turning thrice and lying down again. Fortunately, he was well away from the trap door when he did; in fact, with the sound of snapping matchsticks, he had settled on the harp in the corner.

With one hand holding the flute to his lips, Harry kept playing a couple notes back and forth, thanking Hagrid once more for the gift. He opened the trap door with his other hand, and with some maneuvering, he was able to settle on the edge, legs dangling over, into the darkness below. Then, gathering his courage, Harry pushed himself off the edge and dropped out of sight. . . . He kept falling and falling and finally landed on something soft and kind of leafy.

He pulled at a vine that had wrapped immediately around his chest, but it just tightened further. The same happened when he yanked his arm away from vines that grabbed his arm. Starting to panic, he wrenched himself this way and that, trying to get free, even as he kept telling himself to calm down, calm down, the only way to get past the Devil's Snare is to sit quietly!

Wait, he didn't know this was Devil's Snare!

Oh.

With great effort, Harry made himself stop thrashing and take as deep a breath as he could with the vine strangling him and choking off more and more of his air. But slowly -- almost too slowly to be borne - - the vines gave way, loosening their hold. When they released him completely, he sank through the tangle of vines to the room below.

Thanks, Harry thought.

He could feel the Baron's smile. You are welcome, Harry Potter. Would you reconsider gifting me with control of the body at this time?

No! . . . No, I can't do that. Harry shuddered. He couldn't bear to have someone else in control of his body, not for this. Not for anything. I'll be fine. You can help if he have to cast spells. Or come up against Voldemort.

There was silence from the Baron.

Harry walked down a long passageway that sloped slightly downward. The place smelled of mildew and rot. Up ahead, he heard a soft fluttery sound and came into a room filled with flying . . . keys? Across the room was a battered door with a silver handle. Against the wall next to Harry stood several broomsticks. Aha!

Not for nothing was Harry the youngest Seeker in a century. It only took him a few minutes to catch the right key -- one with a slightly bent "wing" from being captured once before -- snitch style, and insert it into the lock.

Well done, the Baron intoned as he opened the door to reveal another room.

Thanks, Harry replied, feeling much better able to tell his own thoughts from the Baron's now. Maybe they could really do this. They'd gotten through three traps already, after all. The next one couldn't be much worse.

As he stepped into the room, light flooded the chamber to reveal a giant chessboard and huge pieces that were taller than he was. They looked to be made of stone. The ones directly in front of him were black, and across the board were the white pieces, and none of them had faces. It was eerie.

You will have to play your way across, the Baron said. But Harry decided to try and get to the door behind the white pieces anyway. He tried sneaking around the sides, thinking he could get past this test invisibly. But some (also invisible) force pushed him back time and again, back to the board and the black stone pieces.

I have to play, he agreed.

Be the King, the Baron told him.

Harry nodded and put himself on that space, and the Black King removed himself from the board. After a few moves, when one of his

pawns was demolished by the opposing knight, Harry realized he was playing Wizard's Chess. If he lost, he would be demolished!

I will not let that happen, the Baron promised.

As if you could stop it.

I am a very good chess player. You are becoming one yourself, according to your Professor Snape. He taught you, did he not?

Harry gritted his teeth. Yes, he said, but refused to discuss Snape further and called out, "Queen's bishop to king's knight three." The piece moved as it was meant to, threatening the white team's knight. They managed to capture (and pulverize) that knight as well as a bishop, a handful of pawns and then the white queen. A mere four turns later, victory was assured. The Baron had only needed to interject once, when Harry was moving a rook into a position that would have meant its capture in three turns. All in all, a satisfactory game.

Once the white pieces moved aside so he could get through the far door, he opened it to find a passageway. He charged up the corridor to find another door, behind which lay a huge, smelly troll, not unlike the one he, Millie and Teddy had dealt with last Halloween. It lay face down with a nasty bump on its head. More than ever, Harry was positive that Quirrell was down here, somewhere. He was the one with all the troll experience, after all. Whether or not Snape was here, too, was another matter, but Harry would bet anything he was.

The thought made him both angry and sad, all at once.

Severus Snape is not after the Stone, the Bloody Baron put in. He has only ever wanted to protect you.

Harry growled at the Baron to shush while he crept past the troll to another door, wondering what could lie beyond. Instead of a monster or some kind of trap, all he found was a table with seven flasks upon it in a line. As soon as Harry crossed the threshold, a curtain of purple fire sprang up behind him to cover his retreat, and nasty looking black flames shot up in the doorway just beyond. He was trapped.

There is a note on the table, the Baron told him, and he approached to read the thing. It seemed like a puzzle of some kind.

"Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,

Two of us will help you, which ever you would find . . ."

It went on and on, and Harry tried to reason it out, but he had never been good at these sorts of logic problems. Fortunately, he had a secret weapon.

Severus Snape is a rather clever man, the Baron thought. Decent enough for a Slytherin. But since I have had many more years than he to perfect my own brand of cleverness . . . drink the smallest bottle.

Are you sure? Harry didn't relish the idea of being poisoned.

Of course.

Well, he had to rely on the Baron's aid for this one, didn't he? He had to trust his word. Harry had always found trust a fragile thing, but the Baron had never steered him wrong. With a small sigh, he lifted the littlest bottle and drank. It was as if ice flooded his veins.

The rounded bottle on the right end will get us through the purple flames, to get out.

If we get out, Harry thought, but very quietly. The Baron made no response, so it was possible -- though unlikely -- he had not heard.

Harry peered at the black flames for another moment, squared his shoulders, and walked into the last chamber.

The flames rippled around him but did not burn. For a moment he could see nothing but dark fire, but then he was through the fire and on the other side.

There was someone already there. It was not Snape, but Professor Quirrell.

Quirrell smiled. His face did not twitch at all. "I wondered if I might be meeting you here, Potter." He was standing in front of the Mirror of Erised, Harry realized suddenly. Is that where the Stone was hidden? "I expect you are surprised to find me here."

"Not particularly," Harry replied. His voice, with the ghost inside him, sounded deeper and carried more weight, like it had in the chess cavern. He'd thought before, that it was due to the size of the cavern, but it was just his voice. "I'm only surprised that Snape is not here with you."

"Oh, yes, he does seem the type, doesn't he? But he has only caused me trouble from Day One."

Harry frowned, but did not wish to argue -- nor divulge that he had eavesdropped on a conversation -- so he asked, "What happened to your stutter? It's gone."

"Never had one to begin with," Quirrell said with a chuckle. "But who would suspect poor, s-stuttering P-professor Quirrell of trying to steal the Sorcerer's Stone?"

"Well, me for one. And my friends." And Professor Snape, he thought unhappily.

"You see, you miserable oaf," cried another voice, this one more sibilant, high and weak sounding, seeming to come from Professor Quirrell, except that the man did not move his lips. "You could not even throw off the suspicions of a child!" It was Voldemort's voice, he knew it. But how?

"Show yourself!" Harry called.

"Why, Harry Potter," the voice crooned. Harry craned his neck to see where it was coming from. "Such a forceful little boy. I shall enjoy killing you tonight."

Put up your left hand, the Baron thought, so we can have a shield ready.

"So you've said," Harry taunted as he casually followed the Baron's instructions. He moved slowly forwards, too, to be in better range for throwing spells. "But so far . . . nada."

"A fact that shall be remedied shortly. Kill him!"

"But, Master, the Stone!" Quirrell complained.

"We shall retrieve it once he is dead."

"But I cannot figure out how," Quirrell whined, and Harry wondered how on earth Professor Snape ever got along with this loser.

Apparently Voldemort was thinking along the same lines. "Shut up, you loathsome, disgusting worm. I cannot bear to be saddled with you a moment longer. Turn around and let me see the boy."

"Master, you are not strong enough!"

"I have strength enough . . . for this . . ."

Harry felt as if Devil's Snare was rooting him to the spot. He couldn't move a muscle. Petrified, he watched as Quirrell reached up and began to unwrap his turban. What was going on? The turban fell away. Quirrell's head looked strangely small without it. Then he turned slowly on the spot.

Harry would have screamed, but he couldn't make a sound. Where there should have been a back to Quirrell's head, there was a face, the most terrible face Harry had ever seen. It was chalk white with glaring red eyes and slits for nostrils, like a snake.

"Harry Potter..." it whispered.

Harry tried to take a step backward but his legs wouldn't move.

"See what I have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapor ... I have form only when I can share another's body... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds...."

Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the forest... and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own....

"I had hoped," the face continued, its tone almost cozening, "when I learned you had come to Slytherin, that you might aid me in my quest to correct all that is wrong, all that is hurting the Wizarding world. I want you to stop this ridiculous fight, and help me retrieve the Stone. Better to save your own life and join me, else you'll come to the same end as your parents.... They died begging me for mercy..."

"LIAR!" Harry shouted suddenly.

Quirrell was walking backward toward him, so that Voldemort could still see him. The evil face was now smiling.

"How touching..." it hissed. "I always value bravery... Yes, boy, your parents were brave.... I killed your father first; and he put up a courageous fight... but your mother needn't have died... she was trying to protect you.... Now help me find the Stone, unless you want her to have died in vain. Such deaths are unavoidable in times of war, Potter. You must realize this."

"Unavoidable? You tracked them down and killed them. You tried to kill me, too. I was just a baby!"

"An unfortunate turn of events, yess."

Quirrell was only steps away from Harry now, and Harry stared into the misshapen face of his worst enemy. Unfortunate? Unavoidable? Who is he trying to kid?

You, of course, thought the Bloody Baron softly.

Well, it's not working.

Good, and once again, Harry could feel the Baron smile.

In that moment, a spell leapt toward Harry from Quirrell's wand. Almost instantly, a thought of Protego from the Baron and a twitch of

Harry's wand created a blockade. The Professor's spell skittered off into a wall where it exploded, blasting off chips and shards of stone.

"I thought you wanted to be friends!" Harry cried. "Friends don't blast friends to smithereens!"

"What need has Lord Voldemort for friends, you impudent little boy?" the Dark Lord inquired while casting another spell.

Harry countered it again and zipped off an Expelliarmus, which Quirrell/mort dodged.

"No wonder your minions despise you." The Baron cast a non-verbal spell that Harry only caught the last part of in his mind even as a bright yellow light sped toward Quirrell.

"They fear me and my power!" Quirrell/mort snapped up a shield that absorbed the yellow light instead of reflecting it. "They know I am the most powerful Dark Lord who has ever lived!"

"You call that living?" Harry asked and laughed as he cast another spell.

Movement out of the corner of his eye briefly caught his attention before the Baron physically forced him to look away. But he had seen a dark, shadowy figure creeping around behind Quirrell/mort, as if it would attack the Professor from behind. That was fine with Harry. Unless . . . unless it was someone after the Stone? Like Snape? The height was right, the walk . . .

Cease speculating, Harry Potter. I am telling you this for the last time. You must trust me. Professor Snape is not attempting to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. The ghost's internal voice was so adamant that Harry was stunned for the space of a few heartbeats, leaving the Baron in complete control of his body. Rather than keep his control and fire off spells as rapidly as possible, however, he gave the reins back to Harry as soon as he could retake them.

That, more than anything else, made Harry believe him. Thanks, Harry thought, and tried to push whatever Snape was doing from his

mind, even if the man was getting closer to the mirror and possibly the Stone.

Let me help, the Baron thought, and he put up a partial blockade to the worrying thoughts, leaving Harry's mind clear and focused on the fight. "Petrificus Totalis!" Harry shouted, then, "Protego!" as another spell headed for him. He sidestepped a second spell and cast another one silently.

The dark figure had stopped moving, now almost completely behind Quirrell/mort, which meant he was in Quirrell's line of sight. Just as Quirrell was saying, "My Lord, behind you--" the dark figure cast a spell. Dark red light sped towards Quirrell/mort and he tried to dodge it but doing so placed him in the path of Harry's spell.

A frantic, "Protego," saved him, though not completely. A measure of the Stunner had gotten through, making him wobbly on his feet. A look of pure rage crossed the twisted face in the back of Quirrell's head and the creature screeched, a hate-filled cry that pierced the air like an arrow.

"Seize him, seize him!" Voldemort's high voice shrieked. Quirrell's body lunged -- backwards -- toward Harry.

Not expecting the physical attack, Harry stumbled back as Quirrell/mort reached him. He held up his hands as Quirrell grabbed his wrist. A splinter of pain went through Harry's head, as if splitting his scar in two. He and Quirrell both gave a cry, and Harry struggled as hard as he could to get out of the man's grasp. Quirrell let go, surprisingly, and cradled his hand, which appeared to be blistered and red.

When Voldemort cried for Quirrell to seize him again, Harry tried to shove the man away, pushing at Quirrell's face when Quirrell grabbed his neck. Quirrell's skin roiled beneath his hands, writhing and churning as blisters formed, grew large and burst in gobs of pus. The hands tightened around his throat, and there was a sudden lurching sensation, as if he were falling down, down into a pit . . . something tore loose inside him, like losing a limb. The Baron! He was gone, wrenched away, and the immediate backlash of pain threatened to

whirl Harry away, too. He clenched his teeth and his hands as his chest burst open like a cherry . . . oh, Merlin it hurt so bad . . . and the blood poured out of him . . . and Harry's own neck sizzled and burned, as did the flesh beneath his hands. Quirrell/mort was on fire everywhere his skin touched Harry's. The smell of burnt meat threatened to make Harry vomit.

But he kept hold of the piteous, shrieking monster and hung on as it screamed and screamed forever . . .

And then the dark figure was crouched over him, with dark hair hanging in worried dark eyes. "Harry, Harry, stay with me, you foolish child. Don't move . . ." A cold hand caught one of his burning ones and the relief made the world swim before his eyes. Only then did he realize the Quirrell/mort monster was gone.

"Where did he go?" he wanted to ask, but a glob of blood clogged his throat and made it impossible to croak out more than, "Whey . . . ?" He coughed, spraying blood on the man's robes. "Sorr . . . sorr . . ."

"Shh, shh, Harry, don't talk. Save your strength." The man's other hand held a wand which he waved this way and that. He pulled a vial from somewhere and opened it with his one hand. Harry had secure hold of the other; he could not let it go. "Open up, child. It will be all right."

Harry opened up; what else could he do? But he knew nothing would ever be all right. The liquid burned going down but then the warmth settled in his stomach and spread out to his arms and legs. His eyelids were so heavy they hurt, and he thought he might let them down, rest them, just for a moment. Just a little while. . . .

"Harry, no, not yet. Stay with me. . . Don't go . . . don't go, please . . ."

He hated to ignore the plea, but he really was very tired. With a soft, "Sorry," he let the blackness engulf him and pull him into its dark depths.

TBC . . .

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reads and/or reviews! Sorry this chapter has been so long in coming, but RL has hit me pretty hard of late. There are only a couple chapters left in this story, and then it will be on to Year Two!

There are several lines of description and Voldie dialogue that are snatched directly from JKR's Book One. See if you can pick them out!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 50

By jharad17

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

Harry opened up; what else could he do? But he knew nothing would ever be all right. The liquid burned going down but then the warmth settled in his stomach and spread out to his arms and legs. His eyelids were so heavy they hurt, and he thought he might let them down, rest them, just for a moment. Just a little while. . . .

"Harry, no, not yet. Stay with me. . . Don't go . . . don't go, please . . ."

He hated to ignore the plea, but he really was very tired. With a soft, "Sorry," he let the blackness engulf him and pull him into its dark depths.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Severus sat very still, as if he were balanced, teetering on the edge of a precipice. If he moved a muscle, he would fall and never stop falling. A bleak future of nothingness awaited him. It tempted him to tip over the edge and be done with it. Clasping his hands tight together in his lap, he resisted the urge. His fingers were white from lack of blood. He could not feel them.

He could not feel anything. Except for a great, aching mess where his heart would be if he had one. It hurt, ahhh, Merlin, he'd not felt such pain in years. Not like this, not because of another, not since she had refused his apologies and spurned him forever. Merlin, how he had hurt then

This time, it was her son.

In the hospital wing, in a bed which dwarfed him, the boy lay on sheets the same hue as his skin. His arms and neck were swathed in bandages due to the burns he had received from Quirrell's

immolation. His black frame glasses rested on a corner of the bedside table, leaving the boy's face waif-thin and too pale. What skin Severus could see had an odd, ghostly sheen, though not as eerie as it had been in the crypt three nights past. Then, Harry's skin had glowed, and Severus had known in an instant that he had been possessed by the Bloody Baron again, the idiot. He had not known (not until last night, when the Baron finally reappeared) that the possession had been the boy's idea.

For all his Slytherin resourcefulness, Harry was too much a Gryffindor. The Bloody Baron was far too amenable to an 11-year-old's "suggestions." And Severus was far too old to deal with the kind of heart-stopping terror as he had faced the other night when he caught up to Harry at last. In the room with the Mirror of Erised, he had found the no-longer-stuttering Quirrell (together, somehow, with the Dark Lord) dueling with the young boy Severus had sworn to protect.

His hair was graying prematurely, he just knew it.

When he was creeping behind the Dark Lord's visage to get a better angle for attack, recalling everything that had happened between them, Severus had thought, for an instant, that the boy would give him away. But when Harry spotted him -- and he knew he had been spotted, even before the Bloody Baron had confirmed it for him last night -- he had not betrayed Severus to the enemy, had not insinuated that Severus was trying for the Stone while he was kept busy, had not, in fact, given any indication at all that he had seen Severus. Instead, the boy had waited till his professor was in a good position for cross-spell work -- not directly across from him, but somewhat off to the side, to avoid hitting each other. And he had continued his own spell casting, to the point of enraging the Dark Lord and making him attack Harry physically.

A foolish idea on the Dark Lord's part, as it turned out.

Severus had no idea why Quirrell's skin and blood and hair had burst into flame wherever it made contact with Harry, though Dumbledore had made a few oblique hints about it. In any event, it did not matter why. It only mattered that Quirrell, and thus the Dark Lord, had been vanquished. In fact, if the clash of the two invading spirits --

Voldemort and the Bloody Baron -- had not resulted in the Baron's forcible ejection from Harry, leaving him with the ghost's chest wound as had happened before, the boy might have emerged from the duel entirely unscathed.

Not without some scarring, of course. No one could burn another being to death with their bare hands and not be scarred by the experience. Not unless they were a Dark Lord themselves.

And Harry, Severus vowed, would never even stray down that path. He would see to it himself.

For three full days, with few exceptions, Severus sat a silent vigil in the hospital wing, waiting for Harry to wake. The two of them had much to discuss. Of course, even with the latest vanquishing of the Dark Lord by the Boy Who Lived Despite Himself, Severus could not afford to be found here. He could not afford to be seen so overcome by the state of this child, no matter how much he was, in fact, undone by the results of the child's run in with Voldemort. So he sat under the boy's Invisibility Cloak, hidden. He had found the Cloak in the doorway to the Mirror's room, in the midst of the conjured black fire. It must have slid off the boy when he went through the flames.

In three days, the only time Severus had roused from his chair was for Slytherin's last Quidditch match, and then only because he had to be seen at the event. Unless he thought hard about it, he could not recall who had won.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

A fourth day passed before Harry stirred at all. Even then, he did not waken. His eyes moved rapidly behind closed lids, and his arms twitched in little jerky movements reminiscent of his nightmares. Severus wanted to wake him; he had no desire whatsoever to see this child suffer for another second. But what if seeing Severus frightened him more? He hesitated only a moment, however, before trying to wake the boy, putting a hand on an unburned portion of his arm and jostling him slightly. The boy did not appear to wake, but he did stop thrashing about in his dreams and settled into a more easy sleep.

Severus was willing to count it as a victory.

Into the silence that followed, Severus started one conversation they needed to have, even though he knew that speaking while the child could not hear him nor respond was not the bravest thing he had done lately. Pitching his voice to as low a level as he could, he murmured, "I am so terribly sorry, Harry, for what occurred in my classroom these last few months. Much of what I did was . . . it was not done especially for spite, but to make you an even better Potions student than you already were. I daresay you can whip up any First Year potion in half the time it takes your peers. I pushed . . . I pushed you because I knew you could rise to the challenge . . . But I know that is not how it seemed, and I admit my motives were not so clear or clean when it came to most of my treatment of you or the vitriol I unleashed in my classroom. I can only apologize. I did not realize, until recently, why you spurned my offer of summer placement after I had gone to great lengths to secure it for you, and I was . . ." He trailed off, staring at his bloodless hands. Come now, Severus, he chided himself, he's not even conscious. You can say anything you want. Anything you need to.

"I was hurt, Harry," he admitted at last, and something tight eased in his chest, made it possible for him to go on. "It had happened to me before, you know, with your mother. Many years ago, in a fit of pique, I called her a vile name, and she refused to ever accept my apology. It was the end of our friendship. And then, when you looked at me with such . . . such distaste, with such loathing, and with her eyes, I . . . I snapped. And yes, I continued to snap well after that, too."

He continued to stare at his hands, unable to bear to even look to see if Harry was listening. Hidden as he was, no one else could see them clasped so tightly. No one else could see his pain. No one could see the tightness in his heart, the cold, dark fear that nothing was left but shards and fragments of the trust the boy had once shown him. The darkness and fear waited, ready to welcome him if he spilled over the edge.

"When you fell in that room, with the Dark Lord and Quirrell and all those flames, with your blood soaking your clothes, I thought you

might die before I had a chance to apologize, before knowing I was sorry for hurting you, and it was the worst feeling I have ever had. Worse than the original hurt, I swear it."

Hope was a tiny, fledgling flame buried under the weight of his guilt and shame. Hope was all he had left, hope that he could set things right with young Harry Potter. For so many months, he had not had a chance to speak with Harry. The boy had shut him out, and Severus had nailed closed the door between them. It was not until recently that he realized how much he had enjoyed being able to talk with Harry, about the boy's mother or his studies, or even just about chess. But now he had a chance to say what he needed to, and what he wanted. He had the time and opportunity to share the small details of Hogwarts life as it continued around them, or of his own life, details he had shared with no one till now because he had had no one who cared to hear.

Thus he told Harry about speaking with Dumbledore about what happened with Quirrell, and how he had yelled at the Headmaster for being tricked by Quirrell's duplicity. He described the many get-well gifts which graced the tables beside the boy's bed, including what looked like a toilet seat from the Weasley twins. He told him about the Bloody Baron's recovery from the possession, and the ghost's sorrow that he had been forced out of Harry at a very inopportune moment. "He will visit with you, I am sure, when you are able to go back to the dungeons."

At one point, he said quietly, "We lost the last Quidditch match. We were close enough in points at the end of the game that we still won the House Cup, but it would not have been so close if you had played. Mr. Malfoy was put in as Reserve Seeker, which might have worked if the child's father had not been in attendance. I believe you've only met the elder Malfoy briefly, but you must be ever mindful of where his loyalties lie: To himself, first of all. And then his idiot son spent more time checking to see if his father was watching him than he did looking for the snitch. So the Ravenclaw girl -- Miss Chang, I believe -- caught it instead." He paused, then added, "You were missed."

After telling Harry that he had done very well on his Potions final exam as well as on his other subjects, he said, "The Bloody Baron

told me how you connived to have him possess you. A neat little bit of Slytherin cunning there. But listen to me, Harry, this is important, so I shall repeat it as necessary: To chase after a Stone which you knew a madman wanted, with so little disregard for your own life . . . it smacks of Gryffindor stupidity, and I will not have it. I know -- the Baron told me -- that the Sorting Hat thought you would do well in the Lion's den, but child . . ." His voice softened, and he proceeded much more quietly, "But Harry, please understand. You must know that you belong with us, the special ones, the forgotten ones, the ones no one else understands. I know I have not set the best example for you these last few months, but we are the House who protects our own, who watches each others' backs. One of your fellows told me what you were planning the other night, and you should be thankful they did, or I would not have been able to save you from bleeding to death in that maze all alone. You don't need to go through these things alone, Harry, not with your House always at your back."

He paused again, knowing what he said next would be much better said when the boy was awake -- and he would repeat it then; he would probably need to repeat the sentiment over and over for this child. "You nearly threw your life away, Harry, and for what? The Dark Lord could not have taken the Stone; the Headmaster has shared the workings of his trap with me, and his plan, involving the Mirror of Erised, was far more subtle, yet complicated, and far more cunning than any other. He built in failsafe measures, too, to specifically keep anyone who wanted the Stone for themselves from being able to find it. Do you understand what that means, Harry? That the Dark Lord could only have succeeded with the aid of an innocent."

Glancing up, briefly, from his hands, he noted that Harry's eyes were open. He continued in the exact same tone so as not to betray that knowledge. "Only by using you -- if he had captured you instead of trying to kill you -- only then could he have gained the Stone. Do you know what a self-fulfilling prophecy is? Have you ever heard the story of Oedipus Rex?" He waited till Harry shook his head oh-so slowly. "By trying to keep an unwanted, yet prophesied, event from occurring, Oedipus inadvertently caused it to occur, but if he had left things to themselves, the unwanted events would never have taken place. Similarly, by trying to keep the Dark Lord from the Stone, you nearly

helped him attain his goal. Do you see how fruitless your scheme was? The worst is, you would have paid for his victory with your life."

Severus sighed and lowered the hood of the Cloak, and then helped Harry don his glasses so the boy could meet his gaze. Once the boy could see him clearly, he continued, "Let me tell you, Harry: you are far too valuable to sacrifice yourself like that."

In the softest voice Severus had ever heard from this boy, Harry whispered, "'cause I'm meant to defeat him."

Severus shook his head. "No. Not for that. Not at all. You are too valuable a person. You are important to your friends, to your Quidditch team, and to me. You are a good person, a brave if insanely courageous boy, a trustworthy, amusing, talented, intelligent cunning person, one whom I do not want to lose. I . . . I enjoyed when we spent time together poring over photographs and playing chess. I am amazed at the drawings you've done. I framed the one you gave me at Christmas, you know, and I treasure it as I do almost nothing else. Though we are teacher and student, I also thought, I hoped we were also friends. I am so dreadfully sorry we parted company. You overheard something, I fear, that gave you the wrong impression--"

"I know, sir. The Bloody Baron told me."

Severus quirked an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"A bunch of times." Harry looked away. "I didn't believe him."

Quietly, Severus said, "Because trust, for you, is a very fragile thing, and to your mind, I had broken your trust by aligning myself with Quirrell, who had tried to kill you twice already."

Harry nodded, but his expression was filled with suspicion, as if he thought Severus had read his mind.

"I understand, Harry. Believe me. I have that same fragile trust in others. Which is why, when I thought you had spurned my offer, I was so . . ."

"Awful?" Harry's gaze flicked to Severus and away again.

Severus swallowed painfully, but he owed Harry the truth, however debased it made him feel. "Yes, I was awful, as you say. I regret that I was awful to you, when I felt you had broken our fragile trust." His hands gripped one another, still under the Cloak and invisible. "Once again, I am sorr--"

"I know," Harry said quickly and met his gaze again. Spots of color brightened his cheeks. "I mean, I heard you, sir, earlier. I think you thought I was still asleep; I kinda was, still, but . . ."

Severus nodded. "I understand."

They were silent for a time, each in their own thoughts. Then Harry said, "Did we really lose the last match, Professor?"

"Alas, yes."

With a soft sigh, Harry closed his eyes. "Flint's gonna kill me."

"Not if I can help it."

The corners of Harry's mouth turned up, matching Severus' expression very well.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Harry spent two more days in the hospital wing before Madame Pomfrey pronounced him fit to leave. Dumbledore held a special feast in his honor that night. An hour before the feast, Severus found the boy skulking about, in the vicinity of the Potions office, instead of in his room preening for the event.

"I don't want to go, Professor," Harry answered when Severus asked him why. "I killed a man. That's nothing to celebrate."

"No. It isn't," Severus agreed. He led the pale, frowning boy into his office and gestured to a seat. Harry sank into it easily, just as he had before their falling out. His feet still didn't reach the floor, and the skin

over his face and bony arms was stretched tight. He had filled out somewhat over the course of the school year, but this latest stunt with the Baron had stripped away any extra flesh he had gained from the nutrition potions and regular food.

"But, to most of your friends and admirers--"

Harry made a rude noise.

"--you saved the school from the Dark Lord."

"How do they even know what happened?"

"It's supposed to be a secret," Severus explained. "So, naturally, everyone knows."

"It's a bit creepy, how everyone's so excited about Quirrell being dead."

Severus did not bother to correct Harry's manners with respect to Quirrell's title; the spineless fool had not deserved the honorific in the end. Instead, he observed Harry's face for a moment. The new trust they had was as fragile -- likely more so -- than what they'd had before, and Severus considered his words carefully as he sat behind his desk. "No one considers the specifics, Harry, or wonders how he died or what it felt like for you. It has nothing to do with them, and they could not understand if they tried."

"And few enough are trying."

"Such as your friends?" Severus asked. Harry shrugged and looked away. "How are you getting on with them?"

"We're . . ." Harry paused and examined his thumbnail, only recently grown back from being burnt off completely. "We're okay. But I'm having a hard time just talking with them. I mean, I know one of them ratted me out, probably Millie, but I can't be angry with her. Not really."

"Good." He kept the true "rat's" identity to himself. "They saved your life by doing so."

"I guess."

"You sound as if you don't think that's a good thing."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Harry . . ."

The boy held up his hands. "I'm not, like, suicidal or anything, Professor."

"I should hope not!"

"But if not for me, I mean, if I'd never been born--"

"Then it's possible hundreds more, perhaps thousands, would be dead by the Dark Lord's hand."

"You don't know that!"

"Neither do you."

Harry sat back fully in his chair and nodded. "All right. But Quirrell--"

"An abomination created by his own hand and inferior will. He was not living, truly, after giving over his body and its needs to the Dark Lord. If anything, you released him from a horrific fate."

Harry appeared to set his jaw, even as he said, "What about my parents? He . . . he claimed they died begging for mercy, and then he changed his story and said my Dad died quick, fighting him, but that my Mum might not have needed to die at all."

Severus' heart clenched. But those were just words, words the Dark Lord had used to try and keep Harry off balance, or even to sway the boy to his cause. He forced himself to say, "If only she could have sacrificed her son instead. An innocent babe."

Harry looked down at his hands. "Yeah."

Severus considered for a moment. What knowledge did Harry have of mothers, really? "Do you think any mother could make such a choice? Even a mother as odious and callous as your Aunt Petunia?" He waited while Harry thought about the question, and it troubled him more than he could say that Harry could possibly imagine Petunia giving up her son, never mind her nephew.

"No," Harry said at last. "She wouldn't give Dudley over to be killed."

Something clenched in Severus' gut. "But you, she might?"

A small, defeated shrug was all the answer he needed.

"Harry, that's not . . . Harry, look at me." He waited until the boy met his gaze. "Harry, whatever failings your aunt possesses -- and do not misunderstand me, her failings are many and varied -- but they have nothing to do with you. Her issues with her sister and with magic are not your fault."

Harry's frown deepened, and he was thinking rather loudly, so that it was almost impossible to miss his thoughts on his own freakiness and how his family (what there was of it) was right to push him away and revile him.

"They are not," Severus said firmly, not caring if the boy thought he was being Legilimized. "No one is right to ostracize a member of their family just because he is a wizard. Your aunt and uncle are Muggles and do not understand our world, but that does not give them permission to belittle you or starve you or to force you to sleep in a cupboard."

"I know," Harry said, but did not look convinced.

"I hope so. I shall say it over and over until you truly do." Severus moved some papers around on his desk. He had finished grading them long ago and had already reported his final grades to the Headmaster, but he liked having papers here specifically for

moments like these, giving his hands something to do while he collected himself. After the steadying pause, he looked up, pinning Harry to his seat. "Have you reconsidered your wishes for the summer?"

"I . . ." Harry took a deep breath and the room felt electrified, as if the air itself knew something of import was about to occur. "Yes. I have. That is, if your offer still stands, Professor."

"It does."

Harry smiled fully at Severus for the first time in months. "Great! Then I'll stay with you."

"After two weeks with your relatives."

The boy's face fell instantly. "Yeah. After that."

"I will, however, accompany you during those two weeks."

"You'll . . . what?"

"I will spend that two weeks with you, in the Dursley household, taking advantage of their, I'm sure, quite genial hospitality . . ." Severus trailed off, then bit out, "Why are you laughing?"

TBC . . .

A/N: Mocha Lattes for everyone who reads and/or reviews! (Mmmm, love me some mocha lattes . . .)

Sorry, Reader Dudes, that this chapter has been so long in coming. I was in Ireland for more than two weeks, and it was a wonderful vacation, but between that and RL totally conspiring against me, my writing output has, shall we say, fallen off some. But take heart! Only one chapter left in this story, and then it will be on to Year Two!

Better Be Slytherin! – Chapter 51

By jharad17

Warnings for language.

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

Previously on Better Be Slytherin:

"I will, however, accompany you during those two weeks."

"You'll . . . what?"

"I will spend that two weeks with you, in the Dursley household, taking advantage of their, I'm sure, quite genial hospitality . . ."
Severus trailed off, then bit out, "Why are you laughing?"

--HPHPHPHPHPHPHP--

At the banquet, Harry tried really hard to be pleasant and upbeat amongst his friends, while they chatted about final grades which were due any day now, the end of the year and going home.

But Harry wasn't going home. Hogwarts was home, to him, the first place in his memory he felt he belonged. Here he had friends and mentors and people who looked out for him. He had Quidditch and spells, and he wasn't a freak. Well, not the freak he was to the Dursleys anyway. Even knowing he only had to spend two weeks at the Dursleys didn't make him feel much better about the end of the year. He didn't want to leave Hogwarts at all.

The Bloody Baron floated up through the table amongst the First Year Slytherins, and gave Harry a secret wink when the other Firsties screamed and clutched at their dinner plates so as to keep from getting his dripping blood/ectoplasm all over their food.

Harry tried hard not to laugh. "You sure know how to liven up the place. Thanks."

"It is my pleasure, Harry Potter. I am glad to see you at last, and decently recovered."

"Yeah, er, me, too. Good to see you, I mean."

The Baron inclined his head slightly. "I understood your meaning. Are you well? I did not intend to leave your body when I did. The ordeal must have been very trying."

It had been awful, it was true, and Harry knew that no one else could hear the Baron speak, so the Baron could say such things in front of them, and no one would be the wiser. But the other First Years could hear his side of the conversation, so he had to be careful in his response. "I'm fine now. Really."

The ghost narrowed his merciless eyes. "It is unlike you to engage in such blatant falsehoods, my young friend."

With a frown of his own, Harry replied, "I will be fine. How about that?"

"That shall have to suffice," the Baron intoned. "Perhaps I will see you this evening in the dungeons and we can discuss it further. I fear my presence is putting your Housemates off their feed."

Harry glanced around at the nearby tables stuffed with students, some of whom were pale and even trembling a little in proximity to Slytherin House's terrible ghost. Even younger Slytherins did not like to be too close to him, from the cold bleakness that rolled off him to the horrible gleaming "blood" pouring from the stab wound in his chest. Even those students apparently unaffected by the Bloody Baron's presence kept sending him wary glances and drawing their dinner plates closer.

"I see what you mean. Til' later," Harry promised, and turned back to his own dinner as the Baron sank through the table.

"I really wish he wouldn't do that," Millie complained when the Baron had gone. She was on Harry's left and was busy scraping something up with a spoon.

"Scared of a widdle ghost, Bulstrode?" Zabini mocked from across the table.

"Uh, no." Millie held up the spoon, which was heaped with glowing, off-gray ooze. "I just hate it when he slimes my mashed potatoes. Why?" she asked innocently as she flicked the glob at Zabini. "Do you like it?"

The spoonful of gray ooze splattered the front of Zabini's robe. His face drained of color to match the shade of the splotch. "You miserable little--"

"Watch it, Zabini," Teddy said, from Harry's right. "Keep it down in front of the other Houses, if you don't mind. Besides, no one wants to hear your vulgar little mouth, least of all, our Head." He crooked a thumb to aim at Professor Snape at the High Table, only a couple paces from where the Firsties' seats were clustered. It was more than possible that he could hear them. And, Harry noted with a quick glance, Snape was watching them right now. As was the Headmaster.

"Fine," Zabini spat. "We'll sort this out later, Bullstrode." He snatched up his wand and pointed it at his robe. With a muttered "Evanesco," the mess was gone.

"Looking forward to it," Millie sang back at him, absolutely unconcerned. Then, deliberately turning her face away from Zabini, she said to Harry, "You'll come to visit over the summer hols, won't you? Mum said to say she'd love to have you."

Taken off guard, Harry stared. "What? Why?" Barring the invitation at Christmas, which he'd assumed was for pity's sake, since otherwise he was stuck at the castle, he had never been asked over to anyone's house before. This . . . this was . . . well, he didn't know how to describe it.

While he was trying to figure out what to say, Millie's face had grown a frown. "'Cause you're my friend, and friends visit, right? You are my friend, aren't you, Harry?"

"I . . . yeah . . . I mean, I never . . ." Harry bit his lip, and Millie's expression softened.

"It's okay," she said. "You can send me an owl or something."

"Yeah, okay," Harry agreed, relieved that Millie hadn't made him explain. Even after a whole school year of having friends, he could still be blindsided by new expectations. "I'll send you an owl."

As Millie turned to talk with the girls on her other side, Teddy nudged Harry with an elbow. "Cozying up with Millicent over the holidays, eh?" He grinned. "Didn't know she was your type."

"Ted!" Harry squawked. A quick glance showed Millie had not heard.

Just past Teddy was Draco Malfoy, who laughed at Harry's expression. "You're blind as a bat, Potter, if you can't see where she's headed with that. First it's visits, then snogging, then a ring to seal you, and babi--"

"Shut it!" Harry hissed.

"Harry and Millie, sitting in a tree--"

"I swear, Draco, I'll--"

Draco smiled innocently. With his fair hair and bright white shirt, he could pass for an angel. Almost. Then he batted his eyes mockingly. "You'll do what? Snog me, too?"

About to yell again, Harry hesitated. What was he doing? He never got worked up like this over Dudley's taunts. He was losing his cool, and he had mere seconds to get it back or he'd be a laughingstock. So instead of being led by a head of steam, he gave Draco a slow, sly smile. Then he winked broadly and pursed his lips, making kissy noises. "I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Draco sputtered around a mouthful of pumpkin juice, getting half of it on himself. Everyone at that end of the table laughed, and the contest was over. Draco smiled ruefully and nodded at Harry, and Harry nodded back, calmer now, but with a whoosh of butterflies in his stomach, the way he felt when anyone said anything -- even jokingly - - about snogging. He'd gotten that weird feeling ever since he'd been stalked by Gaius Avery. There had only been a couple of incidents with the other boy, but they were enough to make even the idea of snogging repellant to Harry.

Thankfully, no one noticed the change in his mood as dinner finished up, and he was able to eat in peace.

As the dinner dishes disappeared, Professor Dumbledore stood up from the Head Table and the Great Hall silenced immediately.

"Another year gone!" Dumbledore said cheerfully. "And I must trouble you with an old man's wheezing waffle before we sink our teeth into our delicious dessert. What a year it has been! Hopefully your heads are all a little fuller than they were... you have the whole summer ahead to get them nice and empty before next year starts....

"Now, as I understand it, the house cup here needs awarding, and the points stand thus: In fourth place, Hufflepuff, with three hundred and twelve points; in third, Ravenclaw, with three hundred and eighty-two; Slytherin has four hundred and twenty-two and Gryffindor, four hundred and seventy- two."

A storm of cheering and stamping broke out from the Gryffindor table. Harry could see Ron Weasley and his brothers banging their goblet on the table. He was disappointed, but that's what came from losing their last Quidditch game.

"Yes, yes, well done, Gryffindor," said Dumbledore. "However, recent events must be taken into account."

The room went very still. The Gryffindors' smiles faded a little.

"Ahem," said Dumbledore. "I have a few last-minute points to dish out. Let me see. Yes... First -- to Mr. Harry Potter..."

Harry gulped a deep breath. He was getting points awarded? For what?

The room was deadly quiet.

"--for pure nerve and outstanding courage, I award Slytherin House fifty points."

The din was deafening at Slytherin table. Those who could add up while yelling themselves hoarse knew that Slytherin now had four hundred and seventy-two points -- exactly the same as Gryffindor. They had tied for the house cup -- if only Dumbledore had given Harry just one more point.

Dumbledore raised his hand. The room gradually fell silent.

"There are all kinds of courage," said Dumbledore, smiling. "It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends. I therefore award ten points to Mr. Theodore Nott."

Someone standing outside the Great Hall might well have thought some sort of explosion had taken place, so loud was the noise that erupted from the Slytherin table. Harry stared at his friend, knowing now that it was Teddy who had gone to Snape and told him Harry had gone after the Stone, but it was okay, really, and seeing as how he had lived because of it, it was more than okay. He clapped Teddy on the back, and yelled, "We won!"

Millie, Draco, and even Blaise Zabini stood up to yell and cheer as Teddy gave them all a sardonic smile and a small bow.

Harry, still cheering, looked over at the Gryffindor table to see the students there almost white with shock at the unexpected loss.

"Which means," Dumbledore called over the storm of applause, "we need a little change of decoration." He clapped his hands. In an

instant, the scarlet hangings became green and the gold became silver; the towering Gryffindor lion vanished and the huge Slytherin serpent took its place. Snape was shaking Professor McGonagall's hand, and she had a horrible, forced smile. When Snape caught Harry's eye, he almost caught the sense that Snape wasn't any happier about Slytherin winning than McGonagall was.

He would have to ask Snape about that. But later. For now, it was the best evening of Harry's life, better than winning at Quidditch, or Christmas, or knocking out mountain trolls... he would never, ever forget tonight.

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Harry had almost forgotten that the exam results were still to come, but come they did. To his great pleasure, Harry had passed with good marks; Hermione, of course, had the best grades of all the first years. Even Neville Longbottom scraped through, his good Herbology mark making up for his abysmal Potions one. With some help from Draco and Teddy, even Greg Goyle had passed, and Millie was so pleased she'd passed all her classes that she shared out her last box of biscuits from home with her whole study group.

The last couple days before they were due to leave, Harry spent his time hanging out with his friends, eating sweets from Millie, and poring over a book of photographs that Hagrid had given him while he was in the hospital wing. Hagrid had explained that he had sent away to old friends of Harry's parents and asked for pictures they had of the couple, and there were even a few pictures that had Harry in the photo as well. They were wizarding pictures, so they moved about on the page, seeming to wave right at him. It was one of the best gifts he had ever been given.

At that time, he'd also needed to reassure Hagrid that the big man was not to blame for Harry almost getting killed while going after the Stone, even if he had provided the clue about Fluffy. Harry did not want Hagrid to bear any of the blame, when he knew it was all his own doing.

Snape had another story about that. The night after the banquet, he called Harry to his office, and said, "Well, what do you think?"

"About what, sir?"

"About what?" Snape sighed, as if Harry were a simpleton, even though he'd gotten his grades by then, including high marks in Potions. "About why Slytherin won the House Cup this year."

"Because we deserved it?" Harry said, but he knew immediately that it was the wrong thing to say.

"Ludicrous! Slytherin has won the cup for seven years in a row, it is true. But this year it was in the bag for Gryffindor, thanks to the last Quidditch game issue, not to mention that you should have lost points for being out of your room after hours and for going against my direct orders to stay away from that bloody Stone!"

Harry took a step backwards, his hands balled into fists. He should have known better than to think anything had changed! Snape still hated him, and wanted to punish him, and--

"Stop!" Snape brought his hands to his face and rubbed at his forehead. "Please, Harry. Look, I did not mean to yell at you. I am angry at that old coot."

Confused now, Harry stopped sidling towards the door and frowned. "Why?"

Snape sighed again, but his dark eyes met Harry's, and there was true, almost frantic, grief there. Worry. "Because he is egging you on! By awarding you points for that suicidal adventure, he is encouraging you to act in like fashion in the future. But I'll have none of it. I have promised to watch over you, Harry Potter, and to make sure you stay safe and sane through your years at Hogwarts. I will not let that meddling codger send you on more fools' errands where you're more likely to die than not. Is that understood?"

So Snape was angry that Harry had been rewarded for nearly getting himself killed; that made sense. And he didn't want Harry to make a

habit of it, due to expecting rewards in the future. And he would rather have lost the House Cup than Harry be hurt again. He really did care about Harry.

Harry smiled. "I understand."

The Professor let out a tense breath. "Good. No go on with you and let me get back to my work. I shall see you in a few days."

Still smiling, Harry left him to his empty desk. The Professor was due to arrive at the Dursleys the same night Harry returned from Hogwarts. As long as he could manage a few hours of their company, he would be fine.

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*And suddenly, their wardrobes were empty, their trunks were packed; notes were handed out to all students, warning them not to use magic over the holidays ("I always hope they'll forget to give us these," said Fred Weasley sadly); Hagrid was there to take them down to the fleet of boats that sailed across the lake; they were boarding the Hogwarts Express; talking and laughing as the countryside became greener and tidier; eating Bettie Bott's Every Flavor Beans as they sped past Muggle towns; pulling off their wizard robes and putting on jackets and coats; pulling into platform nine and three-quarters at King's Cross Station.

It took quite a while for them all to get off the platform. A wizened old guard was up by the ticket barrier, letting them go through the gate in twos and threes so they didn't attract attention by all bursting out of a solid wall at once and alarming the Muggles.

People jostled them as they moved forward toward the gateway back to the Muggle world. Some of them called:

"Bye, Harry!"

"See you, Potter!"

"Still famous," said Teddy, grinning at him.

"Not where I'm going, I promise you," said Harry.

He, Teddy, and Millicent passed through the gateway together.

"There he is, Mom, there he is, look!" It was Ginny Weasley, Ron's younger sister, but she wasn't pointing at Ron, who had not come through yet. "Harry Potter!" she squealed. "Look, Mom! I can see--"

"Be quiet, Ginny, and it's rude to point." Mrs. Weasley smiled down at them, then noticed Ron coming through the barrier with Hermione and Neville, and moved to greet her son.

Teddy gestured toward a man standing alone, and said it was his father. "See you, Harry. Stay outta trouble."

"I'll try, Ted," Harry called after him.

"Ready, are you?" It was Uncle Vernon, still purple-faced, still mustached, still looking furious at the nerve of Harry, carrying an owl in a cage in a station full of ordinary people. Behind him stood Aunt Petunia and Dudley, looking terrified at the very sight of Harry.

"You must be Harry's family!" said Millicent.

"In a manner of speaking," said Uncle Vernon. "Hurry up, boy, we haven't got all day." He walked away.

Harry hung back for a last word with Millie. "See you over the summer, then. Maybe." If Snape would let him. He hadn't said "no" when Harry had asked, but, "We'll see."

"Hope you have -- er -- a good holiday," said Millie, looking uncertainly after Uncle Vernon, as if shocked that anyone could be so unpleasant.

"Oh, I will," said Harry, and a grin spread over his face. His friends didn't know about Snape coming to stay, or that their Potions Professor would be taking him away from the Dursleys after two weeks, but he had already imagined all sorts of pranks he could play

on Dudley. "They don't know we're not allowed to use magic at home. I'm going to have a lot of fun with Dudley this summer...."

THE END

A/N: And that's it for "Better Be Slytherin!: Year One". Celebratory peppermint frappachinos for everyone! I'm gonna be working on "Before the Dawn" and some of my other tales for a wee bit, and then will start on Year Two. Like JKR, I'll put the summer session at the beginning of each "year." Anyone with title ideas for Year Two, please let me know.

*These scenes were snitched almost whole cloth from the original, with minor changes to fit the Alternate Universeness of my story.